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A Study of George Wilson Knight's Imaginative Interpretation of Shakespeare

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**A STUDY OF GEORGE WILSON KNIGHT'S
IMAGINATIVE INTERPRETATION
OF SHAKESPEARE**

by

Joan E. Biederstedt

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

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LIFE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since the range in modern Shakespearean scholarship is extensive, and the approaches are diverse and often irreconcilable, the intensive study of one critic can provide a provocative insight into one point of view as well as a series of interesting critical relationships.

This is a study of G. Wilson Knight's critical theory which includes his imaginative interpretation of Shakespeare. Since, broadly speaking, Knight's theory is representative of the Imagistic approach to Shakespeare's work, this study will contain many examples of the applications of this theory. In the Companion to Shakespeare Studies, J. Isaacs states:

On the borderline of scholarship and aesthetics lies the newly fashionable study of imagery on psychological principles. William Whiter opened the subject in 1794. William Spalding had some penetrating remarks in 1833. Halpin and the old Shakespeare Society, and Furnivall and the New Shakespeare Society, were not unconcerned with processes and with specific fields of imagery, but not until the present century, largely in the wake of the fashion for Donne and the Metaphysicals, did the problem become acute. In 1918 (published 1924) H. W. Wells made a penetrating analysis of Elizabethan Poetic Imagery; G. Ryland's Words and Poetry (1938) was a sensitive study. Elizabeth Holmes in 1929 published Aspects of Elizabethan Imagery; Edmund Blunden in Shakespeare's Significances (1928) brought a poet's knowledge of processes to the imagery of King Lear. G. Wilson Knight in Wheel of Fire, 1930, The Imperial Theme, 1931, and Shakespeare's Tempest, 1932, made stimulating if not always acceptable suggestions, and Caroline Spurgeon has tackled the problem methodically and as a whole by means of card indexes, and has issued samples of her findings in Leading Motives

In the Imagery of Shakespeare's Tragedies, 1930, and Shakespeare's Iterative Imagery, 1931.

In considering the complete title of G. Wilson Knight's Myth and Miracle: An Essay on the Mystic² Symbolism of Shakespeare, one encounters immediately the predominant preoccupation of its author; namely mystic symbolism, and its thematic growth and development through Shakespeare's later plays. The scope of Knight's work in comparison to Caroline Spurgeon's work on imagery is definitely broader. A critic in comment states:

Here we encounter the problem of what critics better equipped than Miss Spurgeon have done with her material, as an illustration of what she might have done, or a sample of what still remains for criticism to do. The man who first showed the potentialities of her researches is the English critic, G. Wilson Knight. Before the publication of any of Miss Spurgeon's material, Knight had been working informally along closely similar lines, and The Wheel of Fire, published in 1930, notes the significance of a good deal of recurrent imagery, including such important clusters as love-and-jewels-and-dangerous-sea-journeys, and traces parallel imageries through several plays. . . . What he does with her work is fit it into the giant critical project in which all his books are chapters, the polarization of all of Shakespeare, in fact all of poetry, into two columns representing a basic dichotomy: the Music versus the Tempest.³

Unlike Caroline Spurgeon, whose primary field of inquiry was an analysis of Shakespearean imagery with suggestions as to light thrown by the imagery "(1) on Shakespeare's personality, temperament, and thought, (2) on the themes

¹J. Isaacs, "Shakespearian Scholarship," A Companion to Shakespeare Studies, ed. Harley Granville-Barker and G. B. Harrison (New York, 1934), p. 320.

²The meaning of mystic, as used by Knight, is nebulous. He is not using the word in its theological denotation but rather in a literary connotation.

³S. E. Hymon, "The Critical Achievement of Caroline Spurgeon," Kenyon Review, X (Winter 1948), 103.

and characters of the plays,"⁴ G. Wilson Knight uses images and symbols to establish large categories which revolve around the focal symbols of music-tempest. Commenting on this purpose, Knight proposes that this tendency to neglect the Shakespearean imagination has wrecked our understanding. Perhaps it is but the natural result of the excessive importance attached to Shakespeare's psychology and characterization by the criticism of the last century. While one views the plays primarily as studies in character, abstracting the literary person from the close mesh of that poetic fabric into which he is woven, one shall, by continually over-emphasizing certain qualities in each play and attending closely to no others, necessarily and by creating a chaos of the whole. If, however, one gives attention always to poetic color and suggestion first, thinking primarily in terms of symbolism, not characters, one shall find that each play in turn appears more and more amazing in the delicacy of its texture, and then, and not till then, will the whole of Shakespeare's work begin to reveal its richer significance, its harmony, its unity. In place of that unity, there is chaos; in place of that music, tempest. Confronted with this amazing collection of plays formulating the grandest intuitions in terms of intellectual chaos, the reader has been able neither to rest, nor move to any safety. The mind must have an object for its inquiry; and the mind has long ceased to know the Shakespearean imagination as an objective fact.⁵

⁴Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us (Cambridge, Eng., 1936), p. ix.

⁵George Wilson Knight, The Shakespearean Tempest (London, 1932), p. 3.

According to Knight these investigations can be considered to lie directly in the tradition of A. C. Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy, which Knight thinks is too often wrongly supposed to have been limited to the minutiae of "characterization." But these investigations also offered something new, particularly in what might be defined as the willingness, or even will, to find in great literature significances that may best, to challenge the opposition and avoid all misunderstanding, be called "mystical."

Though "Intellectual" in technique, Knight states that his work was never so in either origin or purpose. He further states that his work has sometimes been associated with what is often called the "Cambridge" school of literary criticism, headed by such names as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and, later, F. R. Leavis, if writers so different may be grouped together; however, Knight maintains that his work is not criticism as such but interpretation:

I would, however, emphasise once again that poetic "interpretation", as I see it, is to be firmly distinguished from "criticism". The critic is, and should be, cool and urbane, seeing the poetry he discusses not with the eyes of a lover but as an object; whereas interpretation deliberately immerses itself in its theme and speaks less from the seats of judgement than from the creative centre. It deliberately aims to write of genius from the standpoint not of the reader, but of genius itself; to write of it from within. So, while the critic stands on his guard against the lure of the unknown and prefers not to adventure too far from home, interpretation, it must be confessed, is happiest among the vast open spaces of what is, nevertheless, a severely disciplined speculation.⁶

G. Wilson Knight places criticism at the opposite pole of interpretation. Criticism to him suggests a certain process of deliberately objectifying the

⁶George Wilson Knight, The Imperial Theme (London, 1931), pp. v-vi.

work under consideration. In the criticism of a work, the critic compares it with other similar works in order to show in what respects it surpasses, or falls short of, these works. Criticism is accordingly active and looks ahead often treating past work as material on which to base future standards and canons of art. Knight concludes with the statement "that criticism is a judgment of vision."⁷ On the other hand, interpretation is a reconstruction of vision. Interpretation tends to merge into the work it analyses; it attempts, as far as possible, to understand its subject in the light of its own nature, employing external reference, if at all, only as a preliminary to understanding; it avoids discussion of merits, and, since its existence depends entirely on its original acceptance of the validity of the poetic unit which it claims, in some measure, to translate into discursive reasoning, it can recognize no division of "good" from "bad." In this statement, interpretation, as opposed to criticism, is passive, and "looks back, regarding only the imperative challenge of a poetic vision."⁸ In his own statement Knight affirms:

I pass to analyse poetry from a slightly different view. Already we have seen it as "expressing" a "vision" of a "space-time" world. Now a vision without expression, either in art or life, being scarcely our concern, the "expression" is necessarily very important: and as my arguments develop, its importance will be seen to grow. Poetry may be said to blend the arts of music and painting: to fuse the spiritual and material. These indeed may often be considered to correspond in some sort to our "space" and "time" elements, though "space" and "time" must be allowed to correspond respectively either to "spirit" or "matter" according to the argument. All these dualisms are unreal, and poetry, which resolves them,

⁷George Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire (London, 1947), p. 1.

⁸ibid., p. 1.

creates always something much nearer to reality; and therefore our thinking in these provisional terms--in terms of dualisms--though necessary, must be elastic.

. . . I will analyse the poetic product and see it as the result of a marriage of elements. From the marriage of the spiritual and material results the specific poetic "Incarnation". And thence we shall begin to see poetry as a rounded whole, concrete, solid.⁹

Since the interpreter understands the work of art by a subtle process of connatural acceptance, all poetic reality demands and awakens an especial intuition. It would seem to be Knight's thought that a Shakespearean play certainly has elements both psychological and ethical, but it has much else, of more universal suggestion. These are precisely the elements which constitute poetic enjoyment. They are received intuitively, enjoyed and swiftly forgotten; intellect is as a sieve which lets the precious liquid escape and preserves only those elements which are fitted to its own practical purposes. What remains is what interests the memory, the intellect, and common sense. Thus an imaginative reaction to a poem is a succession of intuitive states, each forgotten in its unique quality as it passes, and, save for a minute residuum of the richer essence, which fortunately accumulates slowly on every fresh acquaintance, handing on to its successor only those elements which the intellect and memory happen to like. After reading Macbeth, one tends to remember the chief persons, and the story: all the rest, the child symbolism, the varied atmospheric suggestion, the tempests, and strange screams of death, all this is only appreciated after years of study.¹⁰ The extent of

⁹George Wilson Knight, The Christian Renaissance (London, 1933), p. 31.

¹⁰G. W. Knight, Shakespearean Tempest, p. 7.

this theory of "interpretation" will be pursued later in the study when it will be seen as the logical extension of Myth and Miracle.

In addition to placing G. Wilson Knight in a critical context, in his own phrase as an "Interpreter" of Shakespeare, it is also imperative to examine his general aesthetic principles. Therefore, preliminary to the explanation of Myth and Miracle, the source of Knight's imaginative interpretation of Shakespeare, and the demonstration of it when applied to Hamlet and The Tempest, which is the primary purpose of this study, Knight's aesthetic theory will be considered. Departing as he does from the realistic editors of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century, the romantics of the early nineteenth, and the historically-minded sceptics of the twentieth, Knight's imaginative interpretation poses an additional problem to be solved in this study. Is Knight a new romantic, a follower of nineteenth century Germanic rhapsodists, or an original contributor to Shakespearean scholarship? What is his approximate stature in the field of Shakespearean studies?

The approach to a work of art will vary as the critic or interpreter defines art, the artist, the work of art, and the audience or effect of art as well as the tangential concepts associated with the defining of art such as source, expression and intention.

Basically, Knight is more preoccupied with the prophetic visionary character of the artist and the work of art, than he is with the actual artifact in the Aristotelian concept of imitation. This is evidenced in the following statement from Myth and Miracle:

Art is an extroverted expression of the creative imagination which, when introverted becomes religion. But the mind of man cannot

altogether dispense with the machinery of objectivity, and the inwardness of religion must create, or discern its own objective reality and name it God. Conversely, the artist, in process of growth, may be forced beyond the phenomena of actuality into a world of the spirit which scarcely lends itself to a purely artistic, and therefore objective imitation.¹¹

According to Knight, The Tempest is the most perfect work of art. His reasons for this further elucidate his concept of art. Knight feels that The Tempest is at the same time both a record of Shakespeare's spiritual progress and a statement of the vision to which that progress has brought him. It is apparent as a dynamic and living act of the soul, containing within itself the record of its birth; it is continually re-writing itself before our eyes. Shakespeare has in this play so become master of the whole of his own mystic universe that that universe, at last perfectly projected in one short play into the forms and shapes of objective human existence, shows Knight, in The Tempest, a complete view of that existence, no longer as it normally appears to man, but as it takes reflected pattern in the still depths of the timeless soul of poetry. And, since it reveals its vision not as a statement of absolute truth independently of the author, but related inwardly to the succession of experiences that condition and nurture its own reality, it becomes, in a unique sense beyond other works of art, an absolute. There is thus now no barrier between the inward and the outward, expression and imitation. God, it has been said, is the mode in which the subject object distinction is transcended. Art inspires to the perfected fusion of expression with imitation.

¹¹George Wilson Knight, The Crown of Life (London, 1947), pp. 22-23.

"The Tempest is thus at the same time the most perfect work of art and the most crystal act of mystic vision in our literature."¹²

Poetry becomes pre-eminently a blend of the dynamic and static, of motion and form; and, at the limit, the perfectly integrated man, or superman, is to be conceived as a creature of superb balance, poise and grace.¹³

There is an essentially visionary character in Knight's concept of poetry. Repeatedly he states that poetry expresses a vision of a "space-time" world.

Viewing art in this context, the artist or poet is a seer and prophet because he sees something in the space-time world. The artist expresses a direct vision of the significance of life, and for his materials he uses, for purposes of imitation, the shapes, the colors, the people and events of the world in which he finds himself. But in the course of the spiritual progress to which he is dedicated, it may happen that the implements of outward manifestation in the physical universe become inadequate to the intuition which he is to express.¹⁴ The following passage illustrates the "almost mystic quality Knight ascribes to the artist:

There is meaning in Shakespeare's art; but that is not to say that Shakespeare has a meaning in his head and proceeds to express it in his art. His art is more than expression; it is creation, born from a fusion of his own thoughts, dreams and intuitions with a chosen narrative, the choice of which exists in the order of action,

¹²Ibid., pp. 27-28.

¹³G. W. Knight, Wheel of Fire, p. viii.

¹⁴G. W. Knight, Crown of Life, p. 22.

not in the order of thinking. The poet responds, perhaps without knowing why, to a certain tale; and the precise reason for his decision to follow up response with action must be as elusive and unanalysable, to himself and to others, as life itself.¹⁵

In explaining the work of art, Knight consistently uses the term organism. Organic life is characterized by this: every part of the organism, every aspect, presents a facet of the one controlling and infusing principle. It has been stated that a spirit-matter marriage or incarnation is, in one way or other, at the heart of poetic creation, and indeed, creation generally. It is next important to realize how, according to Knight, this dualism is similarly reflected in the art-content as distinguished from the creative process. Being itself creation, art has ever creation for its theme. But creation is always the ideal, the closing of the dualism. Destruction in some form will tend to make the action; creation to close it. Two worlds will be separated, then joined.¹⁶

Balancing this rather undefined concept of subject matter, Knight posits a very definite stand on the language of poetry. He believes that discursive reasoning is the handmaid of poetry and prophecy, not their master. So, also, metaphoric speech is not the fanciful and insecure thing it is usually considered, but rather the truest flower of verbal art.¹⁷ And again:

Poetic utterance may thus result from a blending of emotion and thought in one abstract noun, or a blending of either, or both, with a more concrete image. The one primary process is all we

¹⁵ibid., p. 34.

¹⁶G. W. Knight, Christian Renaissance, p. 55.

¹⁷ibid., p. 34.

need to remember: a fusion of the subjective mind with words to create a potent and living utterance.¹⁸

As expected, the image, metaphor, and symbol are important touchstones not as isolated unique figures of expression but as clusters, which, in turn, indicate similar themes.

What is the desired effect of the work of art considered above? Knight states that it is a kind of "spiritual" progress. This must be the result of a passive submission to a poet's work. A play produces an imaginative reaction which is a succession of intuitive states. These ideas are seen more clearly in the negative consideration he gives: intentions, causes, sources, and characters.

"Intentions" belong to the plane of intellect and memory: the swifter consciousness that awakens in poetic composition touches subtleties and heights and depths unknowable by intellect and intractable to memory. That consciousness we can enjoy at will when we submit ourselves with utmost passivity to the poet's work; but when the intellectual mode returns, it often brings with it a troop of concepts irrelevant to the nature of the work it thinks to analyse, and, with its army of "intentions", "causes", "sources", and "characters", and its essentially ethical outlook, works havoc with our minds, since it is trying to impose on the vivid reality of art a logic totally alien to its nature.¹⁹

From this statement it is clear then that, for Knight, the maxim that a work of art should be criticized according to the artist's intentions is false. The intentions of the artist are but clouded forms which, if he attempts to crystallize them in consciousness, may prefigure a quite different reality from that which eventually emerges in his work.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁹G. W. Knight, Wheel of Fire, p. 7.

In Knight's thinking, both the source or sources of a work and the intention of an artist, are used by many critics to explain the work of art in terms of causality. Both fail empirically to explain any essential whatsoever. He further explains that there is, clearly, a relation between Shakespeare's plays and the works of Plutarch, Holinshed, Vergil, Ovid, and the Bible; but not one of these, nor any number of them, can be considered a cause of Shakespeare's poetry, and therefore the word source (defined narrowly by Knight as the origin whence the poetic reality flows) is a false metaphor. In Shakespeare's best known passage of aesthetic philosophy, the poet's eye glances "from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven"; and the poet's pen turns to "shapes" the "forms of things unknown." The source of Antony and Cleopatra, if a source is necessary, is the transcendent erotic imagination of the poet which finds its worthy bride in the old world romance. It seems that the great poet must, if he is to forgo nothing of concreteness and humanity, lose himself in contemplation of an actual tale or an actual event in order to find himself in supreme vision. Knight continues:

It should be further observed that, although the purely "temporal" element of Shakespearian²⁰ drama may sometimes bear a close relation to a tale probably known by Shakespeare, what I have called the "spatial" reality is ever the unique child of his mind; therefore interpretation, concerned so largely with that reality, is clearly working outside and beyond the story alone. Now, whereas the spatial quality of these greater plays is different in each, they nearly all turn on the same plot. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the poet has chosen a series of tales to whose life-rhythm he is spontaneously attracted, and has developed them in each instance according to his vision.²¹

²⁰G. W. Knight consistently spells Shakespearian in this manner. Thus it will differ from Shakespearean, the spelling used throughout the study.

²¹G. W. Knight, Wheel of Fire, pp. 8-9.

Finally, the concept of character is subordinated by Knight. He dismisses it in his essays because he feels that it is constantly entwined with a false and unduly ethical criticism. Where one person within the drama is immediately apparent as morally good and another as bad, the interpreter notes the difference but follows his dramatic intuitions. A person in a drama may act in such a way that no one is antagonized but is aware of beauty and supreme interest only; yet the analogy to that same action may well be intolerable in actual life. When such a divergence occurs the commentator must be true to his artistic, not his normal ethic. Ethics are essentially critical when applied to life; but if they hold any place at all in art, they will need to be modified into a new artistic ethic which obeys the peculiar nature of art as surely as a sound morality is based on the nature of man. From Knight's interpretation centered on the imaginative qualities of Shakespeare, certain facts certainly emerge which bear relevance to human life, to human morals; but interpretation must come first. And, for Knight, interpretation must be metaphysical rather than ethical.²²

Knight's basic concepts of art have been culled from his various writings to provide a suitable context for his monograph, Myth and Miracle. It is not the intention of this investigation to criticize individual tenets of Knight but rather to show throughout the study how his major critical works are an extension of many of the aesthetic principles arranged here. The chief critical attacks on those aesthetic principles will be presented.

²²ibid., pp. 10-11.

CHAPTER II

MYTH AND MIRACLE

Myth and Miracle is considered by Knight as "a brief outline of a thesis which I regarded as my main contribution to Shakespearian studies."¹ Stating the method which has been followed in this work, Knight affirms that his method was to regard the plays as they stood in the order to which modern scholarship had assigned them. He refused to regard sources as limiting in any way the significance of the completed work of art. Knight also proposed to avoid the side issues of Elizabethan and Jacobean manners, politics, patronage, audiences, revolutions, and explorations; and to fix attention solely on the poetic quality and human interest of the plays concerned. Though secondary considerations necessarily condition the material of a poet's work, it is the nature of his accomplishment within and transcending those limits that the interpreter must always search for in determining the lasting significance of either poet or prophet. Knight further states:

For this reason, though I refer to the author of the plays as Shakespeare, I leave any discussion of the questions of consciousness or unconsciousness, intention and inspiration, as unnecessary to a purely philosophic analysis of the text. To the critic of the poetry the word "Shakespeare" stands alone for the dynamic life that persists in the plays, and any other "Shakespeare", is a pure abstraction. We should avoid irrelevancies. That spiritual quality which alone causes great work

¹G. W. Knight, Crown of Life, p. vii.

to endure, through the centuries should be the primary object of our attention; and that quality is implicit in the printed page. My method is empirically justified: where other commentators have found incoherence and the inevitable "Incompetent coadjutor", it will show wherever the Shakespearian rhythm or metaphor rings true, order, reason and necessity.²

In the essay G. W. Knight considers primarily the Final Plays, which he considers a logical culmination of a series which starts about the middle of Shakespeare's writing career with Julius Caesar (1599) and reaches an apex with The Tempest (1611). These Final Plays expose to a careful analysis a remarkable coherence and significance; and, by throwing them into direct relation with their predecessors, show that those improbabilities of plot texture and curiosities of the supernatural descending on the purely human interest--as in Pericles and Cymbeline--are not the freaks of a wearied imagination, as has been usually supposed; nor the work of that convenient "Incompetent coadjutor" who is too often at hand when necessary to solve the difficulties of Shakespearean interpretation; but rather the inevitable development of the questioning, the pain, the profundity and grandeur of the plays they succeed.

The first group of plays constitute the problem plays in which there is an apprehension of the "spiritual" versus "hate-theme." It has often been observed that Hamlet reflects a mind in pain and perplexity; so, in different ways, do Troilus and Cressida and Measure for Measure. In Hamlet one is confronted by that mode of the spirit which sees the world of men and nature

² ibid., pp. 9-10.

as an "unweeded garden" (1.11.135)³; bereft of vision, tortured by too much thinking, obsessed with love's impurity and death's hideousness. In Troilus and Cressida the same idea occurs with reference to the frailty of romantic love. Both in the matter of love and death, the thinking in these plays is essentially a time-thinking. Immortality of the spirit in time and decay of the body in time are both fearful to Hamlet; the inability of love to stand the test of time is a torture to Hamlet and Troilus. It is as though in these two plays all higher values were enslaved, and "Injurious Time" (IV. iv.42) enthroned supreme, their antagonist and victor. In Measure for Measure the pain is less; the light of a pure Christian ethic shines through the play, and there is a forecast of the stoic philosophy of the tragedies to follow. The hate-theme, closely connected with time-thinking and inimical to romance and religion and value, as such, eats into the thought of these plays, blighting, decaying. Othello, which followed these plays, demands a different kind of analysis from its predecessors and successors in Shakespeare's progress, in view of its classic structure, its concentration on form, its purely aesthetic impact. But it may be observed that its plot perfectly crystallizes the thought of the preceding plays: the devil of cynicism, Iago--in whom is combined much of Hamlet, Thersites, and Lucio--causes the hero to distrust the thing of purity and innocence. Desdemona is betrayed; and Othello has slain the thing he loved.

Othello thus completes the first group, the group of problem plays; plays which reflect the sick soul. But if Othello completes this group, it as surely

³All Shakespearean quotations used in this study are from The Complete Works edited by George Bagshawe Harrison, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1952.

heralds the next. The next group, by viewing life in terms of passion and tragedy, gives a solution, as satisfactory as the solution of tragedy may be, to the baffled questions which preceded. It is a mistake to regard such plays as Macbeth and Lear as in essence pessimistic. Where humanity is shown as intrinsically grand, and his stage is the battleground of a mighty conflict, there is a purpose and a noble destiny: where these things are in evidence, there is no room for the "sick soul"; and, conversely, the "sick soul" has no knowledge of these things. Macbeth and Lear are characterized by the thunder of tragedy, and the mystery of eternity broods over a tragic close. In Macbeth and Lear the Shakespearean symbol of tragic conflict--the storm or tempest--which had lent splendour to Julius Caesar, but had been avoided in the problem plays and only curiously and half-heartedly wedged into the plot of Othello, now recurs in full force. Storm in the elements accompanies the thunder and lightning of the passionate heart of man. In Lear the suffering of mankind is sublimated into a noble, stoic destiny: Lear, Gloucester, Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, the Fool, endure their lot, and are aureoled with the halo of suffering. The play is a play of creative suffering. All, it is to be noted, are brought by their own pain to a noble and exquisite apprehension of the pain of others. Hamlet thought only of himself. Lear goes far to answer the questions of Hamlet on the matter of death. Death is the sweet cessation of suffering, and one is at peace with it in Lear, as one was never at peace with it in Hamlet. In the same way the hate-theme of the earlier days is given sublimity and tremendous meaning in Timon. Timon is the grand and universal hater--but only because he is by nature the grand and universal lover. In Timon of Athens one is at peace with the surdiness and foulness

of mankind. All these plays are to the reader what they must have been to the author, revelations of profundity and grandeur: the mystery of human fate--though still a mystery to the intellect--is intuitively apprehended as one endures to the end of great tragedy.

Now it is important to observe the tremendous advance in optimism and the mystic apprehension of the tragic sacrifice which is marked by the next tragedy, Antony and Cleopatra. Death is here sublimated as the supreme good, and directly related to the theme of love. The protagonists, Antony and Cleopatra, it has been said, "die into love." The love-problems and death-problems are resolved by being harmonized in the unity of death in love. The tempest and storm symbolism of the earlier great tragedies does not recur in Antony and Cleopatra, but gives place to a new mystic symbolism in the music that precludes the final sacrifice of love (IV.III.12). The emergence of this music-symbolism at this moment of the tragedy is all important for an understanding of the third group of plays. The furthest limit of direct representation is here reached: tragedy is merging into mysticism, and what is left to say must be said in terms not of tragedy, but of miracle and myth. The inner truth of the tragic fact will thus be explicated in the narratives of the last plays from Pericles to The Tempest, and their plots will reflect the poet's intuition of immortality and conquest within apparent death and failure.

The stories of Pericles and The Winter's Tale remarkably are alike. Both plays are throughout impregnated by an atmosphere of mysticism. The theology is pseudo-Hellenistic. The Delphic oracle and a prophetic dream occur in The Winter's Tale; Hermione is restored to Leontes in a chapel to the sound

of music, Thaisa to Pericles in the temple of Diana, with the full circumstance of religious ceremonial. The goddess Diana appears to Pericles. A reader sensitive to poetic atmosphere must necessarily feel the awakening light of some religious or fundamental truth symbolizing the plot and attendant machinery of these two plays.

Cerimon, who raises Thaisa from the dead, is a recluse and a visionary:

I hold it ever,
Virtue and cunning were endowments greater
Than nobleness and riches: careless heirs
May the two latter darken and expend,
But immortality attends the former,
Making a man a god.

(III.II.26-31)

The body of Thaisa, supposed dead, is cast ashore by the tempest in the coffin.

Cerimon, by his magic, and with the aid of fire and music, revives her:

Well said, well said; the fire and cloths.
The rough and woeful music that we have,
Cause it to sound, beseech you,
The vial once more: how thou stir'st thou black !
The music there! -- I pray you, give her air.
Gentlemen,
This queen will live; nature awakes; a warmth
Breathes out of her; she hath not been entranced
Above five hours. See how she 'gins to blow
Into life's flower again!

(III.II.87-96)

Commenting on this incident Knight says:

This incident with the exquisite conception of the character of Cerimon, and the reviving of Thaisa, is one of the pinnacles of Shakespeare's art: this scene and those of the restoration to Pericles of his long-lost daughter and consort which follow, are alone sufficient to establish my thesis that the author is moved by vision, not fancy; is creating not merely entertainment, but myth in the Platonic sense.⁴

⁴G. W. Knight, Crown of Life, p. 15.

Knight feels that almost of an unequal beauty is the scene of the restoration of Thaisa in the Temple of Diana.

Cerimon. Look! Thaisa is
Recovered.

Thaisa. O, let me look!
If he be none of mine, my sanctity
Will to my sense bend no licentious ear,
But curb it, spite of seeing. O! my lord,
Are you not Pericles? Like him you speak,
Like him you are: did you not name a tempest,
A birth and death?

Pericles. The voice of dead Thaisa!

Thaisa. That Thaisa am I, supposed dead
And drown'd.

Pericles. Immortal Dian!

Thaisa. Now I know you better,
When we with tears parted Pentapolis,
The king, my father, gave you such a ring.
(shows ring)

Pericles. This, this: no more, you gods, your present
kindness
Makes my past miseries sport. . . .

(V.III.27-45)

That last thought of Pericles is echoed again, with clear religious and universal significance, in the Vision of Jupiter in Cymbeline.

In The Winter's Tale, the plot turns on Leontes' distrust of Hermione's conjugal loyalty. There is much stress laid on the importance attached to infidelity in Shakespeare. The horror at the passing of love's faith is twin to the horror of death: the difficulty is quite as much a metaphysical as a moral one--Troilus cannot understand the patent fact of its existence. In Hamlet and Troilus these death and love problems are given dramatic form, and leave one distressed. In Othello the faithlessness-theme is crystallized into

a perfected classic mould and makes a great play, but since Desdemona dies untrusted, the play leaves one pained. In Antony and Cleopatra, however, the love of the protagonists is shown as untrusting and untrustworthy, a spiritual and passionate thing tossed tempestuously on the waters of temporal existence, yet by the synchronizing of faith with death, one is left with a vision of a timeless instantaneous ascension in death to love, which is life. This tragic apprehension is explicated in narrative form in the parables of Pericles and The Winter's Tale. Leontes is guilty of Othello's distrust, and thinks Hermione dead. He suffers years of remorse, but at last she is restored to him, in a temple, with ceremony, and to the sounds of music. In Shakespeare the falling of love's faith is essentially a fundamental difficulty, and one with the difficulty of loss in death: conversely, perfect love eliminates fear. The infidelity-theme of The Winter's Tale is thus not essentially different from the loss of Thaisa at sea. In both the tempests of temporal conditions are seemingly at war with the otherness of a purely spiritual experience.

In both these plays we have the theme of a child bereft of its mother and threatened by storm and thunder. The emphasis on tempests is insistent, and the suggestion is clearly that of the pitifulness and helplessness of humanity born into a world of tragic conflict. That the tempest is recurrent in Shakespeare as a symbol of tragedy need not be demonstrated. Its symbolic significance is patent from the earliest to the latest of the plays--in metaphor, in simile, in long or short description, in stage directions. The individual soul is the "bark" putting out to sea in a "tempest": the image occurs again and again. For instance, in Macbeth,

Though his bark cannot be lost,
Yet it shall be tempest-toss'd.

(I.III.24),

and in Timon of Athens,

. . . other incident throes
That nature's fragile vessel doth sustain
In life's uncertain voyage.

(V.I.205-207),

and in Pericles, which contains memorable passages of storm poetry in III,i.,

Marina says:

Ay me! poor maid:
Born in a tempest, when my mother died,
This world to me is like a lasting storm,
Whirring me from my friends.

(IV.I.17-20)

The theme of helpless childhood synchronized with storm in Pericles and The Winter's Tale is significant, just as the tempests in Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and Lear are significant: poetic symbols of the storm and stress of human life, the turbulence of temporal events reflecting and causing tempestuous passion in the heart of man. Also in these two plays the music which accompanies resurrection and reunion is present. This music may perform a dual function: first, to suggest, as a symbol of pure aesthetic delight, the mystic nature of the act being performed; second, to anaesthetize the critical faculty, as does the overture in a theatre, and prepare the mind for some extraordinary event. These are in reality dual aspects of the same function: for music, like erratic sight, raises the consciousness until it is in tune with a reality beyond the reach of wisdom. "Music, moody food for us that trade in love," says Cleopatra (II.v.i). Music in Shakespeare is ever the solace and companion of love:

If music be the food of love, play on.
Give me excess of it, . . .

(Twelv. 1.1.4-5),

and love in Shakespeare the language of mysticism. For this reason the mystic happenings in these plays are accompanied by the theme of music.

The third of the mythical plays, Cymbeline, evidences many of the former elements. The faithlessness-theme in which Posthumus distrusts Imogen is present and Sago is resuscitated in the deceiver Sachimo. Posthumus' name suggests the birth-theme of the two former plays: like Marina and Perdita he is cast unprotected into a hostile world. Cymbeline's long-lost sons, Guiderius and Arviragus, bring to mind the lost children of Pericles and Leontes. Again the apparently dead are found to be alive, Guiderius and Arviragus think Imogen is dead, and even prepare to bury her. Solemn music sounds at her supposed death. Posthumus, too, is led to think Imogen dead independently.

Without analysis of the sequence of Tragedies and Myths, the Vision of Jupiter from Cymbeline will appear dramatically unnecessary and crude: with knowledge of Shakespeare's state of mind in the writing of this play, when his imagination must have been burningly conscious not alone of human life, but of the mystic significance of it, which he already touched in Antony and Cleopatra and Pericles, it is quite reasonable that he should attempt a universal statement in direct language concerning the implications of his plot. Knight maintains that the scene becomes a priceless possession of the interpreter of Shakespeare, because it is by far the most important scene in the play.

Posthumus, in the depth of his misery and remorse, sleeps in prison. He has prayed to heaven to take his life and finally called on his love, whom he has mistrusted, whom he believes dead through his fault:

O Imogen!
I'll speak to thee in silence.

(V.1.28-29)

There is next a lengthy stage direction, with a three times iterated mention of music. Posthumus' father, mother, and two brothers appear. And these figures chant, to a haunting dirge-like tune of words, a piteous complaint to Jupiter. It is of value to observe the universal significance of their words, and its direct bearing on the troubles and trials of Posthumus, who has endured the same kind of suffering as Shakespeare's other heroes.

In Cymbeline Shakespeare is forced by the increasing inwardness of his intuition to a somewhat crude anthropomorphism in the Vision of Jupiter: and this anthropomorphic theology is inimical to artistic expression. Cymbeline contains a personal god called in to right the balance of a drama whose plot, like that of Pericles and The Winter's Tale, is incompatible with the ordinary forms of life; but this god, true enough to the religious intuition of the author, yet comes near to exploding the work of art in which he occurs. The form of dramatic art is necessarily extroverted and imitative; and Shakespeare has passed beyond interest to imitation. If a last work of pure art is to be created there is only one theme that can be its fit material. A prophetic criticism could, if The Tempest had been lost, have hazarded its name: for in this work Shakespeare looks inward and, projecting perfectly his own spiritual experience into symbols of objectivity traces in a compact play the past progress of his own soul. Shakespeare is now the object of his

own search, and no other theme but that of his visionary self is now of power to call forth the riches of his imagination.

In recalling the outline of Shakespearean progress, Knight claims that in the Problem plays there is mental division: on the one side an exquisite apprehension of the spiritual--beauty, romance, poetry; on the other, the hate theme--loathing of the impure, aversion from the animal kinship of man, disgust at the decaying body of death. This dualism is resolved in the Tragedies: the hate-theme itself is finely sublimated in Timon by means of the purification of great passion, human grandeur, and all the panoply of high tragedy. The recurrent poetic symbol of tragedy in Shakespeare is storm or tempest. The third group, the Myths, outsoars the intuition of tragedy and unites plays whose plots explicate the quality of immortality: the predominating symbols are loss in tempest and revival to the sounds of music. It is about twelve years from the inception of this lonely progress of the soul to the composition of The Tempest.

Now on the island of The Tempest Prospero is master of his lonely magic. He has been there for twelve years. Two creatures serve him: Ariel, "airy nothing" of poetry; and the snarling Caliban, half-beast-half-man; the embodiment of the hate-theme. These two creatures are yoked in the employ of Prospero, like Plato's two steeds of the soul, the noble and the hincous, twin potentialities of the human spirit. Caliban has been mastered by Prospero and Ariel. Though he revolts against his master still, the issue is not in doubt, and the tunes of Ariel draw out his soul in longing and desire, just as the power of poetry shows forth the majesty of Timon, whose passion makes universal hate a noble and aspiring thing. These three are the

most vital and outstanding figures in the play: for Shakespeare had only to look inward to find them. But there are other elements that complete the pattern of this self-revelation.

Prospero's enemies are drawn to the magic island of great poetry by means of a tempest raised by Prospero with the help of Ariel. In Alonso, despairing and self-accusing, bereft of his child, are traces of the terrible end of Lear; in Antonio and Sebastian, the tempter and the tempted, plotting murder for a crown are traces of Macbeth. But, driven by the tempest-raising power of tragic and passionate poetry within the magic circle of Prospero and Ariel, these hostile and evil things are powerless: they can only stand spellbound. They are enveloped in the wondrous laws of enchantment on the island of song and music. Caliban, who has been mastered by it, knows best the language to describe the mystic tunes of Ariel:

Be not afeared; the isle is full of noises,
 Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
 That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again; and then: In dreaming,
 The clouds methought would open and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
 I cried to dream again.

(III.II.147-155)

The protagonists of murder and bereavement are exquisitely entrapped in the magic and music of Prospero and his servant Ariel. So, too, were the evil things of life mastered by the poetry of the great Tragedies, and transmuted into the vision of the Myths. The spirit of the Final Plays also finds its perfected home in this last of the series. Here the child-theme is repeated in Miranda, cast adrift with her father on the tempestuous seas; here the lost son of Alonso is recovered, alive and well, and the very ship that was

wrecked is found to be miraculously "tight and yare and bravely rigg'd" as when it "first put out to sea" (V.i.224). Prospero, like Cerimon over Thaisa, revives, with music, the numbed consciousness of Alonso and his companions; and, as they wake, it is as though mortality were waking into eternity. This thought makes necessary a statement and a distinction as to the dual possible approaches to the significance of The Tempest.

First, it is possible to regard it as the poet's expression of a view of human life. With the knowledge of Shakespeare's poetic symbolism, the wreck suggests the tragic destiny of man, and the marvellous survival of the travellers and crew as another and more perfectly poetic and artistic embodiment of the thought, expressed through the medium of anthropomorphic theology in Cymbeline, that there exists a joy and a revival that makes past misery, in Pericles' phraseology, "sport." According to this reading Prospero becomes in a sense the "god" of the Tempest-universe, and there is the compelling suggestion as to the immortality of man in such lines as Ariel's when Prospero asks him if the victims of the wreck are safe:

Not a hair perish'd;
On their sustaining garments not a blemish,
But fresher than before.

(I.ii.217-219)

Regarding sea-storms and wreckages as Shakespeare's symbols of human tragedy, there is special significance in Ariel's lines:

Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

(I.ii.297-400)

The soul's desire of love in Shakespeare is consistently imaged as a rich something set far across tempestuous seas, as is evidenced in this song:

Come unto these yellow sands,
 And then take hands:
 Curtsied when you have, and kiss'd
 The wild waves whist.

(1.11.375-378)

Commentators divide into two camps as to the syntax and sense of the last two lines: Is "whist," or is it not, a nominative absolute? And if not, how can waves be kiss'd? A knowledge of Shakespeare's imagery, however, is needed to see the triumphant mysticism of the dream of love's perfected fruition in eternity stilling the tumultuous waves of times. This is one instance of many where the imaginative interpretation of a poet, and a knowledge of his particular symbolism, short circuits the travails and tribulations of the grammarian or the commentator who in search for facts neglects the primary facts of all poetry--its suggestion, its color, its richness of mental association, its appeal, not to the intellect, but to the imagination.

In the second approach The Tempest is a record, crystallized with consummate art into a short play, of varied themes which indicate the spiritual progress from 1599 or 1600 to the year 1611, or whenever, exactly, The Tempest was written. According to this reading, Prospero is not God, but Shakespeare --or rather the controlling judgment of Shakespeare, since Ariel and Caliban are also representations of dual minor potentialities of his soul. From this approach three incidents in the play reveal unique interest. First, the dialogue between Prospero and Ariel in 1.11. where Ariel is tired and cries for the promised freedom, and is told that there is one last work to be done; second, Prospero's well-known farewell to his art (Knight maintains that Prospero clearly regards his art as pre-eminently a tempest-raising magic); and third, Prospero's other dialogue with Ariel in V.1. where Ariel

pities the enemies of his master and draws from Prospero the words:

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch: a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply,
Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art?

(V.1.21-24)

This speech, for Knight, suggests the transit from the intermittent love of poetic composition to the perduring love of the mystic.

These two methods of approach considered separately and in sequence are not as significant as they become when it is recognized they are simultaneously possible, and, indeed, necessary. Together they are complementary to The Tempest's unique reality. The Tempest is at the same time a record of Shakespeare's spiritual progress and a statement of the vision to which that progress has brought him. It is apparent as a dynamic and living act of the soul, containing within itself the record of its birth: it is continually re-writing itself. Shakespeare has in this play so become master of the whole of his own mystic universe that that universe, at last perfectly projected in one short play into the forms and shapes of objective human existence, shows in the wreck of The Tempest, a complete view of that existence, no longer as it normally appears to man, but as it takes reflected pattern in the still depths of the timeless soul of poetry. And, since it reveals its vision not as a statement of absolute truth independently of the author, but related inwardly to the succession of experiences that condition and nurture its own reality, it becomes in a unique sense beyond other works of art, an absolute. There is thus now no barrier between the inward and the outward, expression and imitation. Art aspires to the perfected fusion of expression with imitation. The Tempest is thus at the same time the most perfect work

of art and the most crystal art of mystic vision in our literature.⁵

G. Wilson Knight maintains that all the plays of Shakespeare because of their basic unity and development of theme must be considered as one gigantic whole. He says:

An unduly personal criticism, it will be said. But that is not true. The critic who picks on this or that speech and then asserts, without due reference to other speeches or plays, that it has the final authority of Shakespeare's considered wisdom, is giving an unduly personal criticism; so, too, are those who take upon themselves to decide arbitrarily that Shakespeare's intention is to show that one character more than another is justified, or that some scene or passage would not have been written save in deference to the public taste of his time; or those whose immediate understanding of the poetry has been over much deflected from its true direction by the desire to search the world's literature and the records of contemporary events for "sources". All those are guilty of an unjust criticism, for they ever credit Shakespeare with their own tastes and aversions, and whenever they find some literary or historic tangent to the fiery circle of poetry, they think, by following its direction into the cold night of the actual, to expose the content of that burning star. But the critic who refuses the name of Shakespeare to any hypothetical figure of history but the creative impulse dynamic in the text of the plays; who yet views each play ever in its place among the completed works, above all, who gives attention to imaginative rather than literal similarities, and refuses to be led astray by any considerations but the hot pulse of passion and poetic significance that beats within the living work of art, and alone endows it with immortality--he, by consistently aiming at a sincere and personal poetic criticism can alone hope to succeed in gaining the true objectivity of interpretation. For the poetic reality alone is the subject of his work.

Therefore the conclusions of this essay, based on a close and detailed attention to poetic and imaginative fact throughout the plays, are set beyond the hostile comment of the expert. . . . If we use the word Shakespeare in the interpretation of this sequence of plays, it should be used as we use the word "God": to signify that principle of unity and coherence within apparent multiplicity and disorder. But the necessity of recog-

⁵ Ibid., pp. 9-28.

nizing the significance of this sequence, especially of those Final Plays, is, indeed, imperative.⁶

Knight uses many examples to establish reasons for his sequence. Tragedy is never the last word: theopanies and reunions characterize the drama of the Greeks. Again, in The Book of Job, which turns on the same question as that which fires the greater plays of Shakespeare--the problem of suffering and a tragic destiny--the same answer is proposed; namely, after endurance to the end the hero has a mystic vision of God, and then, his original wealth and happiness are restored to him tenfold. Neither The Book of Job nor the Final Plays of Shakespeare are to be read as pleasant fancies: rather as parables of a profound and glorious truth. The one attempts a statement of the moral purpose of God to man; the Final Plays display plots whose texture is permeated with immortality. For in Shakespeare, one is insistently aware of the quality of romantic love as in some way intrinsically connected with the immortality of the human spirit: so, too, Beatrice, not Vergil, guides Dante through the spheres of heaven.

G. Wilson Knight refers to the sequences of Dante's Divinia Commedia in terms of a significant comparison. L'Inferno, Il Purgatorio, and Il Paradiso are for Knight "another manifestation in the spatialized forms of medieval eschatology, of the essential qualities of the three groups of the greater plays of Shakespeare, the Problems, Tragedies, and Myths."⁷ Consistently in reference to the two great writers, Knight calls for attention not to the

⁶Ibid., pp. 28-29.

⁷Ibid., pp. 30-31.

poetic forms alone, which are things of time and history, but to the spirit which turns through them and is eternal in its rhythm of pain, endurance, and joy.

CHAPTER III

SHAKESPEAREAN INTERPRETATION -- VALUES AND SYMBOLS

Building upon his previous ordering and grouping of Shakespeare's plays from Julius Caesar to The Tempest in the Problem plays, the Tragedies, and the Myths, Knight formulates his more specific principles of Shakespearean interpretation. This interpretation revolves around two key words, values and symbols.

Knight defines values when he states:

By "values" I mean those positive qualities in man, those directions taken by human action, which to the imaginative understanding clearly receive high poetic honours throughout Shakespeare. While analyzing the sombre plays, I have already observed two main values: war and love.

Knight further maintains that nearly all the plays before Julius Caesar and Hamlet are either war-plays or love-plays. Applying this information biographically supports the idea that perhaps early in Shakespeare's career he sought to express himself through his hero. His natural ambition as a poet was to obtain absolute control over his own mental world, at this time, a very turbulent dominion. His hero would therefore appear as an heroic and successful king. The kingly ideal assumes importance in the light of the historical plays which leaves a powerful impression of kingly glory and kingly responsibility. Imaginative rather than purely logical impressions demonstrate

¹G. W. Knight, Imperial Theme, p. 1.

this. Kingship may be all but idealized to divine proportions:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord.

(R. II, III.II.54-57)

Here, and often elsewhere, the typical Shakespearean "infinity" metaphor of ocean is applied to kingship. That "Value" in Shakespeare is ever infinite, a thing of intuition, emotion, spiritual apprehension: not to be limited by any too material consideration of intellect, is explained by Knight. Through the long historic succession kingship is presented as fraught with temptations, dangers, insecurity; wrongly and rightly possessed; sometimes strongly idealized. Kingship holds an infinite burden of care. Henry VI (3 H. VI, II.v), Henry IV (2 H. IV, III.II), and Henry V (H. V, IV, I), all repeat in noble cadences the same story of anxiety, responsibility, unrest: as though mortal man were too small and too weak to bear so heavy a weight upon his brow. Yet at the end, the furthest splendor of kingship is embodied in Henry V. He knows the divine assurances of Richard II, the kingly unrest of Henry VI and Henry IV; even the sense of unrightful position that continually urged Henry IV to a crusade of expiation. Henry V prays before Agincourt:

Not to-day, O Lord,
O, not to-day, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!

(H. V, IV.I.309-311)

He is deeply religious throughout--indeed, "the mirror of all Christian kings" (H. V, Act. II, Cho.), supreme in mortal humility and divine authority, wisdom, and all manly and kingly excellence. Henry V is also successful in action. This is essential to the perfect king; the kingly ideal being necessarily a

worldly and temporal ideal, which must stand the test of action, however sanctioned by the divine and overweighted with infinite care; wherein it differs clearly from the other great ideal, love. Thus Henry V marks the culmination of the historical plays; and is the protagonist of the highest splendor of kingly beauty.

Henry V wars against France for his own, and his country's honor. Honor is a value close-twined with kingship and war. The concept is continually found at the heart of action, its motive, purpose, and justification. Henry V admits that "if it be a sin to covet honor" he is "the most offending soul alive." (H. V, IV.III.28).

The ideal of soldiership is closely related to the other two; and horsemanship is frequently associated with soldiership. Now in the history plays action in the cause of values is expressed mostly by war. Therefore, war, or warriorsip, is itself almost an ideal. It is not easy to find many instances where kingship or honor maintain themselves strikingly without a correspondent stress on war. The king who shows little warriorsip, like Richard II, tends to fail as king. So the perfect king, Henry V, is compact of warriorsip and assertive honor, and his play blazed with an imaginative optimism and glorified boast of power.

These values are wide in scope. The ideal of war, for example, clearly suggests practical efficiency and manly power in general. Such vague qualities often become crystallized and defined in the Shakespearean world in the form of warrior excellence. So, too, honor though usually applied to action military, yet clearly suggests a quality which extends further, and may be applied in any age or place, war or peace; so, also, with the kingly ideal.

It is of all these the most universal and suggests the essence of order, and the extreme grandeur of world-glory.

Kingship must be related closely to order. This concept is of profound importance in Shakespeare. Most of the history plays and many of the Tragedies present a plot of conflict and disorder. Disorder in man, party, or state is a recurring theme. It is often related to images of disease. Frequently there is a concise disorder--symbolism to direct understanding, such as weird phenomena in the sky or on the earth foretelling change and disaster. Examples of this occur in King John, III.iv.153-159; IV.ii.182-187; and Richard II, II,iv.8-15. Such symbols blend with tempests: they seem to represent disorder, tempests seem to represent conflict. The opposite to these is music, which accompanies, induces, or suggests, peace, concord and love. Clearly, the king is himself an order-symbol, being both heart and head of the organic body of the state. Therefore a close attention to the exceeding importance of Shakespeare's order and disorder thought will explain the importance of his kings, the continued emphasis on fidelity and allegiance as the purest forms of honor, and the consequent hatred of treachery, seen in one extreme instance in the plot against Henry V, where it is shown to merit sixty-five lines of vigorous and withering reproof prior to the offender's execution. By viewing the king as a symbol of order, the individual speech, act, or play assumes more than local and individual significance.

Next, there is the thought of world-glory or ceremony. It is the shell of kingship, the outward form of supreme authority. Ceremony may indeed be grand when expressive of true kingliness, but surrounding unrighteous or unwise authority, it has no prolonged life, no value. There are no compromises

for kingly peace in Shakespeare. It is clear, then, that the world-glory of the kingship, the "tide of pomp" (H. V., IV.i.270) on which it puts to sea, is both a positive good and a potential sure to evil and disorder. Joined to essential wisdom and integrity, it is one aspect of a high ideal; divorced from those, it is an unreality, a tinsel thing of tawdriness for which rash men sacrifice the order of nations. The values of love and gold effect a similar association and contrast. Love is frequently compared with gold, jewels, or valued merchandise; it is also contrasted with such precious items. Gold, however valuable in terms of worldly riches, remains a thing temporal and of slight worth; whereas love is divine and eternal. It is the same with kingship. World-glory is embellished with imaginative splendor as the sign and emblem of greatness. But it remains an emblem, and is in no way synonymous with kingship.

All these may be classed as earthly values in comparison with love. Certainly, they on occasion surpass the limits of material things, of reason, and appeal to the depths of the human soul, which in turn expresses them in imagery which suggests the divine and infinite. However, it is not difficult to admit that the values of warrior proficiency, honor and reputation, kingly nobility, and even communal order, may be classed as more closely earthbound than the divine ethereality of love. Love, of course, is a powerful value as the plays Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice, and Twelfth Night illustrate. Love is clearly autonomous throughout such romantic plays. However, love is not the only value present, tempests are present also. In the histories, tempests stand for conflict, and the opposite of tempests is state order. In the romantic comedies the opposite of tempests

is personal love. Political order is usually taken for granted, or if it enters at all, it is a background only, as in As You Like It and Much Ado about Nothing. The chief concern is for the personal love-theme. Tempests are things of severance and division, the ideal is union of families, union of lovers.² Knight comments on the progression of Shakespeare's values:

In the first half of Shakespeare's work each value has its own world where it is supreme. In the history plays the part starts from a deliberate poetic realism, showing the place of personal love in world affairs, showing it necessarily sacrificed to more imperious demands; in the romantic comedies he starts from a purely fanciful apprehension of a magic land--Illyria or Arden or Belmont--where the soul's dreams come true, and sets off his themes of romance against the tempests of temporal existence. The one group shows unity in the state as the ideal; or at least, since that is rarely attained, shows its reflections, honour, noble kingship, righteous war, as a trinity of ideals. The other limits its territory to the magic land of the soul's personal longing. In this sense the romances are the more religious, whereas the histories are rather worldly in subject matter, the poet's attitude, and the ideal towards which the action moves.³

Religion, then, is the value which may be added to or finally blended with love, Knight suggests.

The romantic plays show powerful themes and figures of religion, directly associated with love. In The Comedy of Errors, Aemilia, thinking her husband lost at sea, becomes an Abbess, living at Ephesus. The secluded life is thus her shelter from love's tragedy. Often Friars help distressed lovers. In The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Silvia is helped to escape by Sir Eglamour, who is asked to meet her at Friar Patrick's cell where she intends "holy confession" (IV.iii.43). This foreshadows the more prolix development of the same

²ibid., pp. 1-10.

³ibid., p. 10.

idea in Romeo and Juliet. There Friar Lawrence is an important and carefully drawn person in the play, and the action depends largely on his decisions. In both these plays, the Friar helps love's distress. This happens again in Much Ado about Nothing. The Claudio-Hero tale is an early pattern of those similar plots which succeed each other in the Final Plays: love's tragedy, death and surprising resurrection. Here this particular mechanism of amazing revival is performed by Friar Francis. Romance and religion seem to be closely associated in these plays; however, not until the Final Plays are these two Shakespearean intuitions perfectly blended.

Though the comic spirit ever abides in Shakespeare's works, and at times may attack the kingly ideal and honor and war as well, humor itself is not a value except to the professional jesters, Feste and Touchstone. Sometimes humor may blend with a value, especially love, so that both mingle to create a world of laughing joy. Humor and tragedy are perhaps dual mediums of poetic expression; both seem to be attitudes towards value rather than values themselves.

Often the values enumerated above contrast and blend. Knight explains:

The values, as I have noted them, are maintained fairly safe throughout the first half of Shakespeare's work. They are contrasted, associated, opposed in conflict, blended in harmony. The value of personal faith to a master may touch both allegiance to a king or love of a friend. Love of man for man may be strong as the love of women: in Timon there are hardly any women; and those in Act I disguise themselves as Amazons. Love and soldiership are contrasted often, especially in Much Ado, in Benedict's speech on Claudio's transformation and Claudio's own words (I.I. 306-315) earlier. Love and kingship may be associated. Love is a spirit "high" and "imperious" (T.G.V., II.IV.130). A lady may be "empress of my love" in Love's Labour's Lost, IV.III.56. Love is compared with "sovereignty" in the same play (IV.III.234). Love's presence is like majesty. . . . Love is the soul's true

emperor, the soul's quest, the ultimate peace and the Imperial theme of life. Clearly thus it blends with the divine, and, hence the love office of Friars in the romances. We have observed how, in Prince John's speech, "heavenly grace" is imaged as the Archbishop's "prince". So elsewhere the most perfect religious prince may well be compared, or contrasted, with kingship. The saintly Henry VI speaks:

"My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
Not deck'd with diamonds and Indian stones,
Nor to be seen. My crown is called content;
A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy."

(3 H. VI, III.1.62-65)

In which the ultimate statement of Shakespeare as given in The Tempest is beautifully, at that early date, crystallized.⁴

In the sombre plays these values are attacked by negations: hate, evil, death. They have appeared before, but their appearance was fleeting. Metaphors, passages, or scenes frequently foreshadowed the later plays. But not until the period introduced by Julius Caesar and Hamlet is there a prolonged and careful analysis of these negative forces. In Hamlet evil undermines the royal throne of Denmark and the nobility of Hamlet. There is the contrasted warriorship of Fortenbras and warlike ardor in love of Laertes. Through the greater part of the play, Claudius lives up well to the kingly ideal, in spite of his previous crime. But that deathly crime works in his conscience refusing, through Hamlet, to allow him to attain perfected kingliness and love. He flies from the "mouse-trap" play, conscience stricken, his court in chaos, like Macbeth at the feast, and later has to descend to treachery to save himself. In both Hamlet and Claudius an evil, a death--whether in conscience or pure apprehension--cuts into the typical values. Here, and in

⁴ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

many of the following plays, love and all honor values are ranged together against the instruments of darkness. War and love are grouped side by side in Troilus, and related to honor, especially the infinite honor of Priam, King of Troy. The Greeks, on the contrary, are disordered, disturbed by a vague evil most clearly apparent in Thersites. In that state of consciousness, the very idealism of Agamemnon makes him a futile king. Agamemnon falls as king. He is aware of the purely temporal and worldly aspect of apparent success or failure. Ulysses' reason shows Agamemnon to be wrong, neglecting as he does, the universal principle of order. The idealistic Trojans recognize and practice intuitively the fine values of kingship, allegiance, honor, warriorship, and love. They illustrate an orderly world. The Greeks argue at length and are in disorder. The Trojans have values, the Greeks as a whole, are indecisive. They recognize the need for order but do not attain it.

In Othello, the negative forces oppose Cassio's efficiency as a soldier, his honor and reputation, and Othello's warriorship and love. Macbeth demonstrates an apotheosis of kingship in Duncan and the English king. Macbeth, or the evil drags kingship down to hell. Warriorship and honor are tormented by the evil. Here order is inverted to chaos. In Lear also there is disorder, yet not exactly chaos. There is disorder in the soul, the family, the state. Again the negative forces are embattled against kingship and love; though the blending here is close between negative and positive, and there is no such violent opposition as in Othello or Timon. In Timon love suffers, and the warrior Alcibiades avenges its failure. Timon's curses are long essays on the typical Shakespearean idea of disorder, closely equivalent to Ulysses' speech. Timon, like Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear, has been a good soldier. In all these

plays kingship, warrior-honor, and love are positive forces, grouped together, and often related to order. The negations oppose them.

Value considerations will often enable a reader to interpret a character or a scene with a completely different perspective. Knight remarks:

By such considerations of value must we attempt to interpret the later tragedies. Shakespeare plays are many variations on certain universal ideas, certain symbolic images. There is re-grouping and re-arrangement, but essentials persist. Such essentials, however, will only be apparent to an imaginative response. Imagination will, having observed a striking honor speech, allow other honor thoughts to attach themselves, clustering round the original nucleus, until they form a compact unit of such ideas throughout Shakespeare. Imagination is synthetic, continually at work to make new wholes. But, while we attend only the "characters", and view each person as a single person of isolated human actuality and refuse to complicate our reading by giving free rein to the imagination, we deliberately shut from our understanding the only elements in Shakespeare which will lead us from multiplicity and chaos toward unity, simplicity, and coherence.⁵

In the light of Knight's interpretive theory, to devote excessive attention to characters is fatal. The character cannot be abstracted from those imaginative effects of poetry and poetic-drama of which he is composed. The characters of Shakespeare are compact of poetic color, poetic association, and are, moreover, defined as much by what happens to them or is said of them as of what they do and say.

A play of Shakespeare is, as a rule, Knight says, "primarily imaginative, not psychological or didactic: and often has some striking imaginative effects, which criticism usually ignores."⁶ For example, after listening to Lucius' music Brutus is disturbed by Caesar's ghost. The criticism or interpretation

⁵Ibid., p. 19.

⁶Ibid., p. 20.

that is limited to Brutus' character will praise, first, Brutus' kindness to his boy, and second, his courage when confronted by a supernatural apparition. Being receptive to the imaginative impact, one notes a happy artistic contrast. There is first, a temporary peace, love (Brutus' for Lucius), music (love's voice)--the usual Shakespearean association, healing and restorative: next, there is sudden irruption of an evil spirit, shattering that dream of love in one who has spurned all love for honor. The contrast is vivid. Ethical criticism, regarding only Brutus' reaction to this or that event, and quite neglecting the quality of the events to which the poet subjects him, sees indeed, certain aspects of his personality, but quite fails to find that essential poetic vision unlimited to any one character or event. Often that vision forces one to reinterpret character in a new light. In regard to Brutus, it reveals a powerful evil in him, who to a purely and primarily ethical judgment must assuredly appear immaculate. Knight concludes the discussion:

Ethical criticism judges a man by his intentions, in literature or life. Imaginative criticism judges rather by results, by the tree's fruits, not its roots. No Shakespearian protagonists have purer original intuitions than Brutus and Hamlet; both suffer inward division and disorder, and so pave hell with their actions.

If we grant that such a contrast as we find here in Julius Caesar is worth more than the minutiae of "character", we immediately find a whole world of similar imaginative effects throughout Shakespeare unrolling profound significances.⁷

In the theatre, Knight feels, the audience is surely concerned rather with imaginative effects than ethical problems. The audience sees things as light or dark, happy or sad, peaceful or turbulent. If one is to find an

⁷Ibid., p. 21.

intellectual meaning for any play or scene, one should keep as close as possible to the visual or aural imagination. In Othello, for example, music always suggestive of unity and love, preludes the middle action where Iago instills his poison in Othello, the action where chaos has come again in the soul of married love. So, too, music accompanies love's distress in tragedy in Desdemona's and Ophelia's songs. Music in Lear and Timon is similarly important.

Obviously the more attention given to such elements as above stated, the more instinctively one tends to form groups of imaginative themes and poetical colorings throughout the plays. The dramatic persons and their names change from play to play: but the life they live, the poetic air they breathe, the fate that strikes or the joy that crowns them, the symbols of dramatic poetry, these are not so variable.

Knight explains that there is a good and an evil in the world of the imagination. This is not quite the ethical good. The good in this sense is rather aurally, the musical as opposed to the tempestuous; or the light as opposed to the dark in visual suggestion. Often the imaginative will, to a certain extent, correspond to the ethical good. Macbeth's crime is clearly an extreme evil from whatever point of view it is regarded; and the play's coloring is correspondingly dark. A problem is posed in the Ghost and Hamlet themes in Hamlet. The ethical response must be modified until it is in tune with the imaginative vision. One must use ethical phraseology in subjection to imaginative effects, or as part of one's interpretation of the imaginative whole. Not till then do the profounder levels of Hamlet reveal their content. In the play, right and wrong appear to change places. The good Ghost was in

purgatory, suffering for his crimes. Knight maintains that the ghost scenes have not as yet been properly understood in all their deathly portent and unnatural horror: despite the fact that the poet emphasizes these elements to excess. To the imagination, there is much of evil in the Ghost and Hamlet himself. In the theatre one does not feel inclined to blame him.

Antony and Cleopatra might be regarded as a valuable antithesis to Hamlet. Cleopatra has been often exposed to ethical criticism. She has led an immoral life, and set an example of licentiousness from the very throne of queenship. Knight offers an explanation:

Commentary has constantly been forced into the weakest expedients: such as the suggestion that love is not an easy theme for Shakespearean tragedy as though Shakespeare blundered into the fifth act by mistake; or that Shakespeare shows a crude morality by so extravagant a sublimation of his heroine. Such commentaries result from an inability rightly to place the ethical judgement in an imaginative criticism. For the process is clear. We have abstracted from the play, that is from Cleopatra's words and acts and the words spoken of her by others, certain words stressing her immorality. These form probably, about one-tenth--that is liberal--of the total poetic effect which we may call "Cleopatra". Having been spontaneously drawn to these ethical considerations, because they lend themselves to ethical interpretation, the commentator next proceeds to analyze the whole theme in their light--or, rather fog. A true interpretation will, however, recognize that Cleopatra's final speech is the outstanding effect in the whole play: dramatically and poetically.⁸

It would seem that in the language of imaginative interpretation Cleopatra is wholly good: that is, she and her play are aureoled in completeness, assertion, brightness, all things positive and happy. Hamlet, to the imagination, becomes evil, unhappy, negative and dark. Such is the ethic of the imagination.

The Cleopatra-Hamlet contrast is quite vital to an understanding of

⁸ ibid., p. 24.

Shakespeare. Knight, to some extent, destroys the conventional Hamlet, the courtly prince and gentle humorist of popular appreciation and puts in his own words ". . . something of greater value in its place."⁹ There is a significant good and evil within the vision of poetry: the light and dark of imaginative statement. In this context, Hamlet is a dark, death force; whereas Cleopatra is light, a life-force. Shakespeare has not failed to support his vision with those images proper to its own nature, those images of which his vision is itself composed. In the Hamlet-world there is ever an emphasis on death and disease, in Antony and Cleopatra on forces of life and health. Such suggestive images are important, and it is on the extent and effect of certain clusters of images that attention will now be fixed.

Shakespeare uses the sun, moon, and stars frequently to suggest an infinite splendor and universal justification. Usually they bear relevance to love, as in Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, and Antony and Cleopatra. Sometimes they relate to an idealized imperial power or kingship as with Julius Caesar and Duncan, or, once to warrior-prowess in Coriolanus at IV. 1.115. A kindred infinity suggestion may be expressed by reference to great and historic mountains: Olympus, Pelion, Ossa. These are found in Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Othello, and Coriolanus. The infinity of any value is continually expressed by ocean metaphors, which usually contain powerful suggestion of purely personal emotion. Images from nature abound and very often give the play's dominant color and note. Nature is defiled in Hamlet's confession of melancholia, "a pestilent congregation of vapors"; distorted in

⁹ibid., p. 24.

Macbeth; variously grim and kindly in Lear, idealized in Antony and Cleopatra. Air-life or water-life may be used to suggest something strangely beautiful as in Ophelia's death and Antony and Cleopatra. In Much Ado images from life in both elements help to raise an especial lyric note harmonizing with human life. Air-life, again, may be presented with more evil meaning as in Macbeth, where it suggests a spiritual ethereality. Nature's productiveness, the thought of procreation, contrasts with death and destruction in Macbeth, and is closely related to themes of human birth; is otherwise suggested once in Coriolanus, V.iii.162-164, and fully glorified in Antony and Cleopatra.

Flowers indicate natural sweetness often accompanying love; as in Hamlet and the latter scenes of Lear, where they bear relevance to Ophelia and Cordelia respectively. Conversely, nature's harshness may be stressed, as in Lear and Timon, where it is nevertheless considered less cruel than human civilization. Earlier examples occur in The Two Gentlemen of Verona (V.iv.1-6), and often in As You Like It.

On the human plane, interesting variations played on the thought of feasting can be observed. It is usually a positive life-force. It is aptly related to Claudius in Hamlet, allied to evil suggestion, which incurs the protagonist's disgust. Similarly it is twined close to Timon's bounty, and incurs the satire of Apemantus who confines his own feasting, like Timon later, to roots. It may be misused by the dark forces. The Greeks in Troilus and Cressida, who here are nearer darkness than light, feast Hector, only to subject him to Achilles' repeated insults and feed the satire of Achilles' cynic remarks in soliloquy later. In the same way Iago and Lady Macbeth use drink to further their own purposes. But Iago understands the true

nature of drink which he observes to be "a good familiar creature if well used." In Macbeth the feasting idea is extremely powerful throughout, directly opposed by the dark forces. Conversely, it forms an integral part of the life-vision of Antony and Cleopatra.

There is also a preponderance of disease-metaphors. Especially are they found in Hamlet and Coriolanus. They also appear in Macbeth. In these plays, and throughout Shakespeare, they often suggest national sickness and can be related to the order concept. Disorder and sickness are mutually suggestive in Shakespeare: Timon imprecates both on mankind.

Rich metals, gold and jewels are scattered throughout the plays. The most usual association is that of love and jewels. The loved one is continually a jewel in Shakespeare. In Othello once the whole world becomes a rich stone, "a chrysolite," unworthy to buy love's treasure. Lovers give jewels to each other. Love is the consummation of the soul's longing, the loved-one herself is the soul of the lover: hence the individual's soul may be "mine eternal jewel" in Macbeth. Gold symbolism is powerful in Timon. But greed for rich metals for their own mercenary sake is villainous. The gold of love and the gold of worldly riches may be either associated or contrasted. The jewel thought may be also related to the magnificence and bounty of kingship, as with Claudius' union or Duncan's diamond: and, indeed, the imperial theme of love is often close to the imperial splendors of kingship. All these rich metals assume an important function in association with the positive values of Shakespeare. Conversely, rock, stone, and iron constantly suggest hardness of heart: iron is thus important throughout Coriolanus. Fire is of vivid importance in Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra and glimmers intermit-

tently throughout Macbeth.¹⁰

Though this is not an exhaustive list, it demonstrates how the various values are objectified by certain image clusters. The most important of these values are kingship, honor, war, love, and religion. They may appear together or conflict in the same play. They are often symbolically represented by imagery involving the sun, moon, stars, flowers, feasting, jewels, fire, music, and so on. Opposed to these values are the negations: hate, evil, death--which form the themes of the sombre plays. The imagery representing the negative values often consist in tempests, disease, beasts, rocks, and iron. Nature may be negative or idealized; the sea can be both tragic and peaceful.

Very often the elements of earth, water, air, and fire are dramatic persons on Shakespeare's stage of impressions, sometimes with an explicit, sometimes with an unobtrusive and embedded, schematic interrelation among themselves or reference to plot and action, but always significant. Impressions of sunrise are peculiarly beautiful, suiting the upward and energetic tendency of Shakespeare's work. The process of the seasons plays its part. Rivers and the sea, especially the latter, are symbols of strength and urgency. The only natural image under-emphasized is, perhaps, the mountain.

This vast mesh of imagery is interwoven throughout with human emotions and actions: as when at the close of Lear the impressions become more spring-like to tone with Cordelia's re-entry. These emotions and actions in their turn are felt as sprouting from a natural context, so that man is known to

¹⁰ ibid., pp. 25-28.

be no stronger in his world.

Shakespeare's various conflicts of romantic emotion and critical cynicism, order and disorder, soldierly honor and feminine devotion, life and death, all from a final view dissolve into the opposition, especially strong in the last plays, of his dominating symbols: tempests and music. These apply, in turn, to conflicts psychological, communal, and cosmic; to the interactivity of a static pattern and dynamic rhythm in the art-form itself; and to the blend of masculine and feminine, active and passive, elements in the creating mind of the poet.

In comment, Knight says:

The interplay of music and tempests is the axis of the Shakespearian world. Style of verse, types of play, imaginative themes, character, veins of imagery--all pass in turn, alternating, changing, blending, as the great planet swings over. But all revolve on the "tempest"--"music" opposition. Those two correspond to the most fundamental of ideas necessary to natural, human, or divine realities: conflict and concord; evil and love; death and life. And though these may form difficult combination, such as the frequent apparent incompatibility between a personal love and the state's order, which vitalizes many plays and especially Antony and Cleopatra, yet "tempests" and "music" themselves are changeless metaphysical realities, however Protean and kaleidoscopic the human forms they take. And not only Shakespeare, but all tragic literature, all poetry, has its tempests of division, its unity of poetry's music. A line of poetry delights by its resolution of divided and conflicting words and concepts in the single music of harmonious utterance. So, too, in poetic tragedy. The ultimate dualisms of joy and grief, good and evil, life and death, are unified within the harmonies of the tragic intuition. We watch the process in Shakespeare's greater plays, where "tempests" and "music" are nearly always explicitly actualized. Two truths are told, and given tragic resolution in the sombre plays; as happy prologues to the imperial theme of Antony and Cleopatra where tragedy itself is transcended, and the final unity built of duality takes crystal and exact form before our eyes. In that vision, tempests are stilled, and music alone directs and tunes our understanding. But usually "tempests" and "music" are firmly juxtaposed or finely blended. They take different forms, are clothed in different plots, themselves

ultimate. Through them, we see into the heart and essence of Shakespeare's work.¹¹

Shakespearean poetry grows from a certain wholeness responding directly to the wholeness of creation, with all opposing tendencies allowed to mature in fullest freedom under the final synthesis; which in turn becomes a channel for an almost god-like power. That power is personified in Prospero, to whose "so potent art" even graves are obedient. Such an imaginative medium alone can crash the barriers of human death. So Shakespeare's universe is fundamentally poetical.

G. Wilson Knight's principles of right Shakespearean interpretation, therefore, may be summarized under the following four points. First, each play should be regarded as a visionary unit; to do this, absolute truth to imaginative reaction must be preserved. Second, both temporal and spatial elements should be recognized and any incident or speech should be related to both. The play should be seen as an expanded metaphor rather than an example of the verisimilitude to life. Thus many apparant flaws will be resolved. Third, the use and meaning of direct poetic symbolism including the minor symbolic imagery of Shakespeare should be analyzed. Neither one is related to the normal processes of actual life. Where certain images continually recur in the same associative context and there is reason to believe that this associative force is strong enough, the presence of the associative value should be seen when the images occur alone. Fourth, the plays from Julius Caesar (1599) to The Tempest (1611) fall into a significant sequence. This Knight calls the Shakespearean Progress. Each play to be correctly interpreted should be related to this sequence.

¹¹ ibid., pp. 29-30.

CHAPTER IV

KNIGHT'S PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION APPLIED TO HAMLET AND THE TEMPEST

After establishing Knight's principles of interpretation in the last two chapters, it is profitable to scrutinize the application of such general principles to specific plays. The two plays, which appropriately and interestingly illustrate the application are Hamlet, one of the Problem plays, and The Tempest, the culmination of the Myths.

G. Wilson Knight approaches Hamlet from the two apparently contradictory themes, life and death. The briefer essay on Hamlet appeared in The Imperial Theme and was called "Rose of May: An Essay on the Life-Themes in Hamlet." Of this consideration of Hamlet, Knight states:

There are many themes in Hamlet which justify my present title. Usually they are contrasted, not associated, with the protagonist and his father's spirit. We see a surface crust of life--trivial, dishonourable, sometimes beautiful--split open: within, breeding in the very heart of life, is a loathsome crime, a hideous death. Here I illustrate our contrast with especial regard to the life-themes; noting, however, the imaginative darkness which is the setting of the ghost and, in the middle action especially, of Hamlet. Darkness and light are contrasted.

For Knight, the tragedy of Hamlet occurs in the first act of the play. Death, in the form of the Ghost, brings to birth a death in Hamlet's soul. The powers of darkness and consequently death form allegiances, and the

¹G. W. Knight, Imperial Theme, p. 96.

powers of light and life are seen in contrast. Hamlet is thus opposed not only to certain forms of life, but to life itself: Ophelia is rejected with Claudius. Hamlet does not exactly suspect Ophelia of treachery--not at first, anyway: but he is a whole universe away from the consciousness where love is possible. In this sense, he, and his vision, contrast with our themes of life. It is possible to see clearly the failings and falsities rampant in Hamlet's world, to see with equal clarity that Hamlet is a dark force in the world. This darkness of soul and setting silhouettes the life-themes of the play. In Hamlet's obsession with death, the Shakespearean life-value of warrior-honor is here endowed with almost a divine sanction: abstract, unreasonable, absurd, a fantasy--but noble, purposive, creative.

Every loving son tends to regard his parent as something almost beyond the breath of evil. Hamlet finds his father suddenly cast up from death, a thing of hideous spiritual nakedness, tormented for his foul crimes. Absolute death, absolute evil, disease and horror, and all life now but a tale told by a ghost . . . this is Hamlet's vision. He has seen the utmost horror of evil and death at the heart of life. Every lover sees in the object loved the completion and fulfillment of self, so in Ophelia's death is present an immortal loveliness that itself slays death. This scene grows out of the death-atmosphere, a thing of life, a vision translucent of an essence unconquerable by all the ghosts of hell and their whining messages of revenge. Ophelia touches a life-beauty in death just as Hamlet touches a death-beauty in life. Death itself, in this play of death-horror, she turns to favor and to prettiness. She dies crowned with flowers, thus "Rose of May."²

²ibid., pp. 96-123.

The longer essay on Hamlet appeared in Wheel of Fire and bore the title "Embassy of Death." In this essay Knight points out the nature of Hamlet's mental suffering and the central reality of pain as expressed almost immediately in the opening lines of the play in the outward symbolism of "trap-pings and suits of woe." The reasons are quickly revealed and intensified by: the death of Hamlet's father, the remarriage of Gertrude, the knowledge of the father's sufferings in death, and the confirmation by the Ghost of the murder suspicion. The Ghost exhorts Hamlet to remember him and Hamlet does so the length of the play. Knight comments:

To ignore the unpleasant aspects of Hamlet blurs our vision of the protagonist, the play as a whole, and its place in Shakespeare's work. The matter of the disease-theme in relation to the rest of the play is difficult. The total impression, the imaginative impact of the whole, leaves us with a sense of gaiety, health, superficiality, and color, against which is silhouetted the pale black-robed figure of Hamlet who has seen what lies behind the smiles of benevolence, who has broken free of the folly of love because he has found its inward tawdriness and deceit, who knows that king and beggar alike are bound for the same disgusting convocation of worms and that even an indifferent honest man is too vile to be crawling between heaven and earth.³

Hamlet is essentially a sick soul who is commanded to heal, to create harmony. If good cannot come of evil, is it possible for health to come of sickness? Hamlet's disease is a mental and spiritual death. The curious aspect of the play is that one does not see the universe or life and death predominantly through Hamlet's eyes. The universe in the play is a universe of health, robust, good nature, and humor. Claudius is not drawn as wholly evil. He, in major portions of the play, extends Shakespeare's symbol of

³G. W. Knight, Wheel of Fire, p. 30.

kingship.

Hamlet is, on the other hand, inhuman, a cynic. His disease, or vision, is primarily one of negation and death. Hamlet is a living death in the midst of life; that is why the play sounds the note of death so strong and sombre at the start. The Ghost was conceived throughout as a portent not kind but sinister. That sepulchral cataclysm at the beginning is the key to the whole play. Hamlet begins with an explosion in the first act; the rest of the play is a reverberation thereof. From the first act onwards Hamlet is, as it were, blackened, scorched by that shattering revelation. The usual process is reversed, and the climax is at the start. Hamlet, already in despair, converses early with death; through the remaining acts he lives within that death, remembering the Ghost, spreading destruction wherever he goes, adding crime to crime, thus an "Embassy of Death."⁴

Interesting and provocative as G. Wilson Knight's interpretation of Hamlet is, even more controversial is his comment on Hamlet in relation to Shakespeare's other plays. Concerning its position Knight suggests:

Hamlet is harshly confronted with infidelity and death. The play turns on the baffling of action, and so questions Shakespeare's profoundest sense of the human. Hamlet's is precisely the dramatists' normal problem: to find an action which can objectify the unrestful and groping intuition. In this Shakespeare's normal success is due to an inward integrity and correct balancing of imaginative material. Here the balance is, for once, gone. Aesthetic positives of feasting and music, kingly dignity, love, are aligned with Claudius the murderer; negatives of death and cynicism with Hamlet, the philosopher-hero. Hamlet is thus a questioning as is no other play of the central integrity at the back of, or rather within, the very nature of Shakespeare's creative art. Not only the goodness, but the very dynamic, of

⁴ibid., p. 42.

life is here questioned. What strong action can be, to a sensitive intelligence, inherently poetic? The situation demands coarse, material revenge, and Hamlet, the poet-hero, is at a loss. But static drama is impossible, at least to Shakespeare, and the conflict is resolved by an oscillating action. When in Act IV natural loveliness aligns itself with Claudius, or at least against Hamlet, we have Shakespeare fighting beside his villain to preserve that cosmic, human, and natural trust he, as Hamlet, is losing. The result is indeterminate but satisfactory; the crisis is objectified and afterwards the sense of human force and direction never wavers; the imaginative balance is not again unsteady. But meanwhile Hamlet has pointed on to the especially inward conflicts, the spiritualized action, of the great tragedies.⁵

The publication of "Hamlet Reconsidered" in 1947 adds some further information on Hamlet. Knight begins the essay:

My former essays on Hamlet have for long seemed to me both inadequate and, in their emphasis, misleading. I here offer a restatement, intended, however, less to contradict than to extend and expand my earlier remarks, whilst enlisting for new attention certain scenes and speeches hitherto unjustly neglected.⁶

Knight reiterates the primary emphasis in interpretation or production which must be allowed to the imaginative weight of the Ghost scenes, the Graveyard, the final group of dead bodies, Hamlet's soliloquy and clothes; to the poetic realization of death as a living presence.

The new interpretation given by Knight to Hamlet seems to be the result of acting experience in the role, for he states:

In my earlier essays I rather harshly--and this is sympathetic of what I do find wanting in them--stated that on certain occasions Hamlet showed "utter loss of control"; but this is surely a matter best left to the individual reader, actor or producer. The unsatisfactory nature of my own statements was brought home to me whilst acting the part, when my emphasis fell differently; and differently too during performances in

⁵George Wilson Knight, The Burning Oracle (London, 1939), pp. 44-45.

⁶G. W. Knight, Wheel of Fire, p. 298.

different productions. Shakespeare has been at great pains, as Bridges put it in The Testament of Beauty, to set Hamlet "gingerly"--excellent word!--on the knife-edge dividing sanity from madness. The variations of that delicate balance, which may here or there tilt one way or the other on different readings, are not to be arbitrarily defined.⁷

Knight continues to discuss the mad theme in literature, and he suggests that madness or semi-madness may be used for dramatizing a profound insight. The poet, by projecting and mastering mad themes in literature, is able to make daring explorations without risking personal insanity. "His art is at once an adventure into and a mastery of the demonic, Nietzsche's 'Dionysian' world."⁸ Knight feels that Hamlet the man has often enough been felt to reflect, in some especial sense, the poet himself, the artistic temperament as such; and if this be so, it is quite natural according to Knight, that Hamlet be shown in a state of variously controlled insanity. So, like many poets or dramatists, Hamlet attacks society by wit and buffoonery, as well as by actual play-production, in order to make an all but impossible relation or reference where disparity is clear and the time "out of joint" (I.v.188). Hamlet suffers for his profundity, for his advance, prematurely hastened by his ghost-converse, beyond normality and mortality. "He is on the way to superman status in the Nietzschean sense."⁹

Knight maintains that basically there is a root dualism in the play: that of (1) introspection, deathly melancholia, and a kind of half-willing passivity, and (2) strong government (the king), martial honor (Fortinbras),

⁷ Ibid., p. 300.

⁸ Ibid., p. 300.

⁹ Ibid., p. 301.

and lively normality (Laertes). The various speeches are interpreted in the light of the previous two points. Of particular interest is Knight's interpretation of "The play's the thing . . ." (II.II.641). He states that all art is a means of relating the higher, beyond-thought, super-state to the lower, normal, consciousness of society. It is approach, attack and love, all in one. Hamlet becomes therefore a critic of society resembling Moliere, Voltaire, Swift, Ibsen and Shaw, using art for his purpose, aiming to attack from within, to raise a fifth column in the soul of his antagonist, to awake conscience:

I have heard
That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks.
I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blance
I know my course . . .

(II.II.625-635)

Hamlet wonders if such promptings as the Ghost's are indeed trustworthy. He wants to bring truth to light:

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king!

(II.II.641-642)

In Knight's view, let "king" stand for government, for society the world over, and "the play" for dramatic art, so consistently concerned with sin and conscience, at all times and places. Only then this couplet echoes and re-echoes a more than melodramatic meaning.¹⁰

¹⁰ ibid., p. 303.

Contained in Hamlet, according to this latest essay by Knight, is a central paradox, whereby the good person is a continual threat to a reasonably normal society. The reaction is, of course, violent yet ineffectual scenes. In the last scene, however, according to Knight, all is restored as a kind of balance. Hamlet has regained a "humility before society," he regains the sensibility of a Renaissance gentleman, he knows intuitively the work that is before him; and the actual dual sums up the play's general quality for indecision and oscillation, and of insecure balance. Lastly Hamlet is already on the brink of that "felicity" (V.ii.361) of death to which he has long been more attuned than to life.

The last plays of Shakespeare are distinctive in their seizing on poetry itself, as it were, for their dominating effects; and in doing this also find themselves often reversing the logic of life as it is known, redeveloping the discoveries and recognitions of old comedy into more purposeful conclusions, impregnated with a far higher order of dramatic belief. The finding of Aemilia as an abbess in The Comedy of Errors forecasts the finding of Thaisa as priestess of Diana in Pericles; the recovery of Hero, supposed dead, in Much Ado about Nothing that of Hermione; Juliet and Imogen endure each a living death after use of similar potions. What is first subsidiary, or hinted by the poetry itself, as when Romeo or Cleopatra dream of reunion beyond, or within, death (Romeo and Juliet, V.i.1-9; Antony and Cleopatra, V.ii.75-100) is rendered convincing later.

This tendency The Tempest drives to the limit. Knight affirms:

For once Shakespeare has no objective story before him from which to create. He spins his plot from his own poetic world entirely, simplifying the main issues of his total work-plot, poetry, persons:

whittling off the non-essential and leaving the naked truth exposed. The Tempest, patterned of storm and music, is thus an interpretation of Shakespeare's world.

Its originating action is constructed roughly, on the pattern of The Comedy of Errors and Twelfth Night, wherein wreck in tempest leads to separation of certain persons and their reunion on a strange shore, the plots being entwined with magic and amazement. There is an obvious further relation of The Tempest to A Midsummer Night's Dream, both plays showing a fairy texture, with Puck and Ariel, on first acquaintance, appearing as blood-brethren, though the differences are great. The balance of tempests and music, not only in imagery but in plot too, throughout the comedies (including A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Merchant of Venice) here reaches its consummation; but the Tragedies wherein tempests and music are yet more profoundly important, are also at work within the new pattern of shipwreck and survival.

Prospero is a composite of many Shakespearean heroes; not in character, since there is no one quite like him elsewhere, but rather in his fortunes and the part he plays. As a sovereign wrongfully dethroned he carries the overtones of tragic royalty enjoyed by Richard II. Ejected from his dukedom by a wicked brother--"That a brother should be so perfidious" (1.1.67)--he is placed, too, like the unfortunate Duke in As You Like It and as Don Pedro might have been played had Don John's rebellion succeeded in Much Ado about Nothing. Clarence, Orlando and Edgar suffer from similar betrayals.

Prospero's reaction is one of horror at such betrayal. Of this the great prototype is Timon of Athens, where the princely hero, conceived as a patron and lover of humanity, is so thunder-struck by the discovery of falsehood

¹¹G. W. Knight, Crown of Life, p. 204.

and ingratitude that he rejects man and all his works and in uncompromising bitterness retires in nakedness to a cave by the sea-shore, where he denounces to all who visit him the vices of civilization and communes in solitude, with all of nature that is vast and eternal; his story finally fading into the ocean surge. The Tempest shows a similar movement. Prospero, like Timon and Bellarius--for Bellarius is another, driven to the mountains by the ingratitude of Cymbeline--lives in an island dwelling (probably a cave) by the sea.

Akin too, is Prospero, to all princes whose depth of understanding accompanies or succeeds political failure: to Hamlet, Brutus, Richard II, Henry VI. Hamlet, like Timon, is an archetypal figure. He is out of joint with society of which he clearly sees the decadence and evil. Through his ghostly converse and consequent profundity of spiritual disturbance, he is unfitted for direct action, while nevertheless doing much to control the other persons, indeed dominating them, half magically, from within. Hamlet is a student and scholar; and in this too, as in his surface (though not actual) effectuality and his revulsion from an evil society, he forecasts the learned Prospero, whose dukedom was

. . . reputed
In dignity, and for the liberal arts,
Without parallel. . . .

(1.11.72-74)

This achievement was bought at a cost:

. . . these being all my study,
The government I cast upon my brother
And to my state grew stranger, being transported
And rapt in secret studies.

(1.11.75-78)

Prospero is in straight descent from those other impractical governors, Agamemnon in Troilus and Cressida, whose philosophic attitude to his army's disaster (1.1.11.1-30) calls forth Ulysses' famous speech on order; and Vincentio, Duke of Vienna, in Measure for Measure, whose depth of study and psychological insight make execution of justice impossible. All these are in Prospero; while the surrounding action, both serious and comic, condenses the whole of Shakespeare's political wisdom.

Duke Prospero was, like Lord Cerimon (also a nobleman), a religious recluse on the brink of magical power; and may be compared with those earlier religious persons: Friar Lawrence in Romeo and Juliet, whose magic arts control the action, and Friar Francis in Much Ado about Nothing, who negotiates Hero's death and reappearance. So, too, Prospero manipulates his own plot.¹² Knight summarizes his character:

Prospero is a matured and fully self-conscious embodiment of those moments of fifth-act transcendental speculation to which earlier tragic heroes, including Macbeth, were unwillingly forced. He cannot be expected to do more than typify; there is not time; and, as a person, he is, no doubt, less warm, less richly human, than most of his poetic ancestors. But only if we recognize his inclusiveness, his summing of nearly all Shakespeare's more eminent persons, shall we understand clearly what he is about. He like others, Vincentio and Oberon pre-eminently, is controlling our plot, composing it before our eyes; but, since the plot is as we shall see, so inclusive an interpretation of Shakespeare's life-work, Prospero is controlling, not merely a Shakespearian play, but the Shakespearian world. He is thus automatically in the position of Shakespeare himself, and it is accordingly inevitable that he should often speak as with Shakespeare's voice.¹³

¹² ibid., pp. 204-208.

¹³ ibid., p. 208.

From a complex of air, fire, music, and lightly apprehended sea in contrasted to the duller Caliban-elements of earth and water, Ariel is compounded. He personifies all Shakespeare's more volatile and aerial impressions (he is called a "bird" in IV.1.184, "chick" in V.1.316, and "an airy spirit" in the dramatis personae), especially those images or phrases involving swift thought. Since, moreover, he personifies these subtle and overruling powers of the imagination, he becomes automatically a personification of poetry itself. His sudden appearance depends precisely on Prospero's thought (IV.1.163-165). As a dramatic person, he certainly descends from Puck and also, in view of his songs and trickery, he is a "tricksy spirit" (V.1.226), from the jesters Feste, Touchstone, even Lear's Fool, all of whom share something of the poet's own critical awareness, demonstrated in certain of Puck's generalized speeches and his final epilogue, the philosophic detachment of Feste's and Touchstone's wit, and the Fool's perceptual clarity. Ariel likewise is apart: he is emotionally detached, though actively engaged, everyone and everything, except Prospero and Miranda, being the rough material of creation on which the Ariel-spirit of poetry works; an opposition seen most starkly in his piping to Caliban.

Ariel is accordingly shown as the agent of Prospero's purpose. He is Prospero's instrument in controlling and developing the action. Through him Prospero raises the tempest, Ariel being part of it, acting it (I.11.195-215). He puts people to sleep, so tempting the murderers, but wakes them just in time (II.1.), thunderously interrupts the feast and pronounces judgment (III.111.). He plays tricks on the drunkards (III.11.), hears their plot and leads them to disaster (III.11.; IV.1.171-184). His music leads Ferdinand to Miranda (I.11.). He puts the ship safely in harbor (I.11.226) and later releases and conducts

the mariners (V.i.). He is Prospero's stage-manager; moreover, he is the enactor of Prospero's conception: Prospero is the artist, Ariel the art. He is a spirit of "air" (V.i.21) corresponding to the definition of poetry as "airy nothing" in A Midsummer Night's Dream (V.i.16). His powers range freely over and between the thunderous and the musical, tragic and lyric, extremes of Shakespearean drama.

Caliban condenses Shakespeare's concern, comical or satiric, with the animal aspect of man; as seen in Christopher Sly, Bottom, Dogberry, Sir Toby Belch; and Falstaff, especially in the Merry Wives of Windsor, where his animality is punished by fairies (that Falstaff should show contacts with both Ariel and Caliban exactly defines the universal nature of his complexity). Caliban also symbolizes all brainless revolution, such as Jack Cade's in 2 Henry VI, and the absurdities of mob-mentality in Julius Caesar and Coriolanus.

Caliban drives from other ill-graced cursers, a "misshapen knave" and "bastard" (V.i.268-273), and from all Shakespeare's imagery of nausea and evil expressed through reptiles or, the unforgettable Sycorax (who may be allowed to sum all Shakespeare's evil women), and creatures of black magic, as in Macbeth. He is himself a water-beast, growing from the ooze of slime of those stagnant pools elsewhere associated with vice, being exactly defined by Thersites' description of Ajax as "a very land-fish, languageless, a monster" (Troilus and Cressida, III.III.266). But he has a beast's innocence and pathos too, and is moved by music as are the "race of youthful and unhandled colts" of The Merchant of Venice (V.i.71-79). Man, savage, ape, water-beast, dragon, semi-devil--Caliban is all of them. He is the physical as opposed to

the spiritual; earth and water as opposed to air and fire. That he may, like Ariel, be considered in closest relation to Prospero himself is witnessed by Prospero's admission: "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine." (V.1.275).

Other characters in The Tempest also echo Shakespeare's former creations. Alonso and his party present a varied assortment of more or less guilty people. There is a striking recapitulation of Macbeth in Antonio persuading Sebastian to murder the sleeping king in phrases redolent of Duncan's murder. In both plays the victim's weariness is brutally advanced as an assurance of sleep. That Macbeth should be singled out for so elaborate a re-enactment is not strange, since standing alone in point of absolute and abysmal evil, it shores only slightly (via Sycorax) in the general recapitulation covered by Caliban, whom Prospero specifically acknowledges.

Alonso is less guilty. As one of Shakespeare's many autocratic fathers and also as a king rather pathetically searching for his child, he is a distant relative of Lear. Both are purgatorial figures: he realizes his "trespass" (III.III.99).

Besides Alonso and his party, there is a comic group of Stephano and Trinculo, in association with Caliban. The comedy achieved by these characters is scarcely subtle. Stephano, the butler, is an unqualified, almost professional drunkard with nothing of the philosophic quality of Falstaff or the open, if unprincipled, bonhomie of Sir Toby. Trinculo is an equally poor successor to Touchstone, Feste, Yorick and Lear's Fool. Their representative quality is nevertheless emphasized by their joint embodiment of the two main sorts of clowns: the natural and the artificial.

Ferdinand and Miranda remain. These two characters are representative

of beautiful and virtuous youth as drawn in former plays (Morina, Florizel and Perdita, Gulderius and Arviragus), though lacking something of their human impact. Ferdinand and Miranda illustrate humility, innocence, faith and purity; their words being characterized by utter simplicity and sincerity.

The three characters that dominate the play are Prospero, Ariel and Caliban, and so it is in them that Shakespeare's ideas are chiefly expressed.

Knight says:

Prospero uses his tempest-magic to draw his enemies to the island; and there renders them harmless. He wrecks and saves, teaches them through disaster, entices and leads by music getting them utterly under his power and redeeming and finally forgiving. What are the Shakespearian analogies? The poet himself labors to master and assimilate that unassuaged bitterness and sense of rejection so normal a lot to humanity (hence the popularity of Hamlet) by drawing the hostile elements within his own world of artistic creation; and this he does mainly through tragedy and its thunderous music; and by seeing that, in spite of logic, his creation is good. By destroying his protagonists, he renders them deathless; by expressing evil, in others and in himself, he renders it innocent. And throughout this tumult of creative activity, turning every grief to a star, making of his very loathing something "rich and strange", there is a danger: a certain centre of faith or love must be preserved; this centre at least kept free from the taint of that rich, wild, earthy, lustful, violent, cursing, slimy yet glittering thing that is creation itself. Prospero, unlike Lear, Pericles, and Leontes, guards his Miranda, and with her survives on his island of poetry, with Ariel and Caliban. Who are these? The one, clearly, his art, his poetry in action; the other, the world of creation, smelling of earth and water, with the salt tang of the physical, of sexual energy, and with, too, all those revulsions and curses to which it gives birth. Prospero finds both Ariel and Caliban on the island, releasing the one (as genius is regularly characterized less by inventiveness than by the ability to release some dormant power) and aiming to train the other; and both must be strictly controlled. Prospero, Ariel, Caliban, Miranda: all are aspects of Shakespeare himself. Prospero, corresponding to the poet's controlling judgement, returns to Milan, uniting his daughter, his human faith, to his enemy's son; and Shakespeare's life-work draws to its conclusion.¹⁴

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

It is remarkable how well, for Knight, the meanings correspond. Prospero has been on the island for twelve years (1.1.53); and it is roughly twelve years since the sequence of greater plays started with Hamlet. Before that, Ariel had been imprisoned in a tree for another twelve years (1.1.279); again, roughly, the time spent by Shakespeare in his earlier work. And now, as the end draws near, Ariel cries (as does Caliban) for freedom from ceaseless toil. The Tempest reduces the selfless artistic world to simplicity and remains itself a metaphor.

CHAPTER V

EVALUATION OF G. WILSON KNIGHT NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE CONSIDERATIONS

"Imaginative interpretation" as proposed by G. Wilson Knight is too controversial a subject to be discussed without either negative or positive adjudication. The publication of each book beginning with The Wheel of Fire in 1930 initiated book reviews of varying degrees of approval and disapproval. Extensive criticism of G. Wilson Knight's critical pattern, however, is limited. In 1934, R. W. Babcock wrote a critical essay on Knight's work entitled "The White Knight as Critic." The following are his chief objections to Knight's Imaginative Interpretation:

How much of all this is Mr. Knight and how much is Shakespeare? Has the critic picked up more than he admits from previous criticism, and does his system interpret the Elizabethan Shakespeare anyway? Is he justified in casting aside textual, bibliographical and historical criticism as of no value in solving the poet? Does his system lead to tangential excursions--a curse he lays on historical critics--and is it never self-contradictory? The answers to all these questions will definitely posit Mr. Knight's status as a modern critic of Shakespeare.¹

The first question above is perhaps the crux of the entire critical theory proposed by Knight because it is the question most frequently posed. A review in the London Times states that instead of interpreting Shakespeare,

¹R. W. Babcock, "White Knight as Critic," Sewanee Review, XLII (July 1934), 321.

Knight makes "the mistake of forming a theory and imposing it upon the plays."²

Another reviewer states:

Professor Knight defines and defends his own approach as "imaginative interpretation," implying a dissatisfaction with the recent "realistic criticism" that has done good work, and perhaps done its best work. His term is not happily chosen, not restrictive enough: it has been used to describe that distracting activity which persists in interpreting fictitious characters as if they were Roseberys or Lincolns--imagining what the author had never dreamed of.³

To emphasize the imagistic ties between Macbeth and A Midsummer Night's Dream is only one example. Selecting Antony and Cleopatra as Shakespeare's greatest tragedy largely because of its strategic position between the Tragedies and the Myths and the subsequent mingling of the tempest and music symbolism is another example of strain to achieve a tidy grouping.

Babcock's second criticism is also a major one. One of the most serious objections raised against Knight's reliability as a critic is that perhaps he has been influenced more than he cares to admit by other scholarship in the Shakespearean field. In the preface to Myth and Miracle (1929), debt to Shakespearean criticism of the past and present is slight. The Wheel of Fire (1930) is also free from various acknowledgments. The recent re-editing of both these volumes has corrected the initial failure on Knight's part. In the "Prefatory Note" to The Imperial Theme (1954), Knight carefully acknowledges his debts and his originality:

²Anonymous, "Myth and Miracle," London Times Literary Supplement, August 8, 1929, p. 622.

³Peter Monro Jock, "Shakespeare's Imagery in the Great Tragedies," New York Times Book Review, March 6, 1932, p. 2.

As I have recently suggested in my prefatory note to the enlarged re-issue of The Wheel of Fire, these investigations can be considered to be directly in the tradition of A. C. Bradley's Shakespearean Tragedy, which is too often wrongly supposed to have been limited to the minutiae of "characterization", but they also offered something new, particularly in what might be defined as the willingness, or even will, to find in great literature significances that may best to challenge the opposition and avoid all misunderstanding, be called "mystical". The new patterns unrolled with suddenness and inevitability; and it is right to record here that the thought-atmosphere in which this happened may be related to the early writings of Middleton Murry, and in retrospect I subscribe to the general acknowledgment made on the appearance of my first published work--except for articles--Myth and Miracle (1929; afterwards incorporated into The Crown of Life). The reading of the Final Plays presented in Myth and Miracle was itself new, and had before that been searching, without success, for recognition; but Mr. Murry's general approach and militant support during those years of what might be called the religious content of great poetry served as a stimulus and an encouragement, if not more. Indeed, my final understanding of the positive impact of Antony and Cleopatra owed something to an early article of his.⁴

Knight also makes clear that the first he knew of the content of Colin Still's book on the symbolism of The Tempest called Shakespeare's Mystery Play (1921; revised and re-issued under the title The Timeless Theme, 1936) was after the appearance of Myth and Miracle in 1929. However, years later he found among his papers a jotting on a review of its first appearance; so Still's thesis had apparently been on Knight's mind earlier. In the preface, therefore, Knight acknowledges Still's book by drawing attention to this study.

The relation of Caroline Spurgeon's studies to Knight's own work is also clarified in the same preface. The pamphlet Leading Motives in the Imagery of Shakespeare's Tragedies by Spurgeon appeared in the same year, 1930, as The Wheel of Fire, followed by her other pamphlet, Shakespeare's Iterative

⁴G. W. Knight, The Imperial Theme, pp. v-vi.

Imagery balancing The Imperial Theme in 1931. Knight explains:

Though I should probably have preferred not to, it seemed a duty to read her work as it appeared, and whenever any detail of her discovery lay within the area of my own rapidly unfolding interpretations, I tended to see it as a debt. This was the more natural since our relations were most friendly.⁵

Knight explains away some of Babcock's criticism; however, there are many objective facts which suggest that in general Mr. Knight's prefaces do not tell the whole story about his debts to predecessors. One such fact is the book Shakespeare and Science by Clark which discussed Shakespeare's tempests in 1929. The book Shakespearian Tempest by Knight was published in 1932.

Reviewers have already declared that Mr. Knight's distinction between the Reason and the Intuition--Criticism and Interpretation--is distinctly not original. The Shakespearian Association Bulletin contained the following cryptic remark:

Take two cupfuls of Kant and three of Croce, two Teaspoonfuls of Coleridge and one of DeQuincey; mix together in the neo-Hegelian pot of the two Bradleys; bring to rapid boil in the wheel of fire, and finish off with a little extract of Bergson.⁶

In the light of the above statements, many of Knight's authoritative statements become ludicrous in their dogmatism.

In considering the next objection to Knight's theory, namely, that he does not interpret the Elizabethan Shakespeare, Babcock maintains that, just in the analysis of Hamlet alone, Knight goes astray:

Mr. Knight's Hamlet is a product of the Romantic Heresy promulgated by such men as Gentleman (1770), Steevens (1773), Richardson

⁵ibid., p. vii.

⁶Shakespearian Association Bulletin, VI (July 1931), 101.

(1774), Mackinzie (1780), Robertson (1790), and the nineteenth-century Coleridge, Hazlitt, Lamb, and the twentieth-century Bradley.⁷

In reference to Knight's handling of the same play, another reviewer remarks:

We are forced to observe that the problem of Hamlet--his obsession with evil and his insistence on its universalization--is not Shakespeare's but our twentieth century's and that to get near to the original poetic impulse--generally the most admirable merit of the book--Mr. Knight would have to accept the reality, to Shakespeare, of the "old play" of Hamlet, and that he refuses to do, without offering any compensation.

Babcock's fourth question concerns the justification for casting aside textual, bibliographical and historical criticism as of no value in solving Shakespeare. Many times Knight does this only verbally. In actuality, although he is not reliable in his handling of historical criticism, he uses it. He relies on Lily Campbell's analysis of passions from time to time, and her study is essentially an historical study of Elizabethan psychology. To consider the implications of this question further, one of the most uncritical aspects of Mr. Knight's approach appears in his contempt for textual criticism. He makes references to J. Dover Wilson, but he ignores any light which scholarship can throw on the meanings of the plays. This particular short-coming of Knight is attacked repeatedly by reviewers as the following statement demonstrates:

Professor Knight evinces throughout a lofty disregard of earlier scholarship. He accepts the contents of the First Folio as wholly and solely the work of Shakespeare.⁸

⁷Babcock, p. 323.

⁸Jock, p. 2.

⁹T. M. Parrott, "A Runaway Hobby," Saturday Review, CLIV (December 24, 1932), 676.

Babcock adequately answers all the questions he poses in considering Knight's work and summarizes his critical opinion of Knight in the following comment:

In short, it is an extremely unfortunate development in the history of Shakespearean criticism that such a consciously visionary and self-satisfied romantic as Mr. Knight should now arise, like an echo of his more illustrious predecessors, and flaunt his critical banner to the skies as the only banner worth following into Shakespearean fields--one lone individual critic crying out against the cooperative, historical and bibliographical labors of such competent and tested men as J. M. Robertson, E. E. Stoll, L. L. Schuckling, W. J. Lawrence, A. W. Pollard, and J. Dover Wilson.¹⁰

In addition to the major criticisms of Knight proposed by Babcock and illustrated by various reviewers of his work, another serious objection can be raised concerning his work. Knight frequently fails to qualify his claims sufficiently. He is the master of the sweeping statement as well as the unfounded generalization. Examples from his works are extensive, and seen in isolation, they become ludicrous. "Timon of Athens has gigantic architecture. It is on a scale even more tremendous than that of Macbeth and Lear,"¹¹ is just one example. This is another: "The resulting play, Macbeth, becomes a work of true imaginative literature: It has a quality common to Aeschylus, 'The Book of Job,' Dante, Milton, Dostoevski, Melville, Hardy. I cannot prove this: but it is so."¹² Knight's latest comments on Hamlet disclose the same flamboyant, highly-conjectural approach:

Hamlet's play before the king is provisionally successful, but

¹⁰Babcock, p. 329.

¹¹G. W. Knight, Wheel of Fire, p. 207.

¹²G. W. Knight, Shakespearean Tempest, pp. 26-27.

leads nowhere. Neither here, nor in his move from stage to pulpit to sermonize his mother where, as in his dialogue with Ophelia, a noble super-sexual idealism, degenerates swiftly into infra-sexual neurosis, does he appear really effectual. He can compose a stinging, satiric and ironic play; but he cannot live that wholeness reflected by the art itself as opposed to its obvious content; that wholeness reflected by his address to the Players. He is not--who is?--a man in this highest sense. The play's central paradox, whereby the good person is a continual threat to a reasonably normal society, reaches a climax in these violent yet ineffectual scenes. Hamlet in life cannot act creatively. He looks back, is critical, shows little love. His play is satiric and Jonsonian; his philosophy death-ridden and Websterian; his sex disgust Swiftian and Manichean. He is sunk deep in the knowledge of good and evil and clogged by ethic. Only in reverie, artistic theory and occasional mind-pictures of transfigured man, does he glimpse a resolution. That is, he does not attain to the Shakespearian health which puts him into action and surveys his failure, nor to the New Testament freedom from the law. That is why he cannot move through society with the assurance of a Christ, or a St. Francis; and nothing else, it might seem, would serve his turn. He cannot even get as far as his cousins Timon and Prospero; he cannot rise beyond what Nietzsche calls "the avenging mind". He is thus left divided, all but insane, spasmodic. More: he is ill-mannered which as we shall see, is perhaps worse.¹³

These three examples serve to illustrate the sweeping range of Knight's commentaries; however, when he asserts that the significance of the tempest-music opposition constitutes the only final unity in Shakespeare, even a willing learner may raise the eyebrow of incredulity.

Positively considered, what is the value of such an extravagant and imposing theory? There are perhaps three valuable aspects of Knight's imaginative interpretation. In the light of critical studies, Knight has added to the study of the poetic imagery in Shakespeare instigated by Spurgeon and Kolbe. He has also offered a detailed study of some Shakespearean plays often considered obscure and of lesser stature; for example, Timon and Pericles.

¹³G. W. Knight, Wheel of Fire, pp. 314-315.

Knight has also placed a beneficial emphasis on the whole work of the poet and the advantage of viewing the plays in a unified context. Considering the first important aspect of Knight's work, Fausset states:

Perhaps the most fruitful of Professor Knight's qualities as a critic is the closeness of his feeling for a poet's imagery and for the verbal texture of his style.¹⁴

And expressing the same idea in different terms, Merton says:

The principal contribution of Dr. Knight to modern literary criticism has been his studies of what he calls "impressionism" in Shakespeare. Impressionism, by means of symbolism, imagery, mood, tone and so on, awakens automatic recognition, in the hearer, of the truth the author wants to tell him; and so that truth does not have to be told directly. What Professor Knight calls "impressionism" is really the raison d'être of all poetry, and the most familiar examples of it are the parables of Christ.¹⁵

For Knight, the importance of the imagery is not that it exists, but that it functions, and functions in interaction with every other force that the dramatist sets in motion. It cannot be denied that Knight brought the investigation of Spurgeon and Kolbe on the imagery of Shakespeare to a rich fruition, and for this he is to be recognized.

The method of Knight is to a certain extent unique and interesting. Kept within bounds, it has served to interpret and turn attention to some of the less familiar plays of Shakespeare. Though the hypothesis of a final serenity was put forth long ago, the importance of Pericles in the Myth group was undervalued. The position and understanding of Timon was also obscure. Establishing his theme-patterns and repetitions, Knight draws attention to these little

¹⁴Hugh I'Anson Fausset, Poets and Pundits (New Haven, 1947), p. 181.

¹⁵Thomas Merton, "The Old Dilemma of Good and Evil," N.Y. Times Book Review (September 24, 1939), p. 5.

known plays of Shakespeare and offers a stimulating, at best, and very controversial, otherwise, interpretation of them. Eric Bentley's review of The Crown of Life offers this comment:

Mr. Knight turns in The Crown of Life, to the romances of Shakespeare's last period. He finds Shakespeare passing here from the tragic view of things to a position close to mystical Christianity. The thesis is, of course, both trite and dubious. It is not in the stating of the thesis that Mr. Knight's chief claim to consideration lies, but in the actual particulars of each analysis and in the correlation between them.¹⁶

Correlation is, in essence, what the third positive value of Knight's work is. His approach to Shakespeare is seeing the panorama of plays as a unit, a whole body of plays, each one a stepping stone in the progress of the total work, and Knight feels that it is only in this total view that each play assumes prominence and advances to culmination in The Tempest. T. S. Eliot in his Introduction to The Wheel of Fire in reference to Knight's grouping says:

I confess that reading his essays seems to me to have enlarged my understanding of the Shakespeare pattern; which, after all, is quite the main thing. It happened, fortunately for myself, that when I read some of his papers I was mulling over some of the later plays, particularly Pericles, Cymbeline, and The Winter's Tale; and reading the later plays for the first time in my life as a separate group, I was impressed by what seemed to me important and very serious recurrences of mood and theme.¹⁷

Eliot then proceeds to explain what he feels is Knight's contribution to Shakespearean studies:

To take Shakespeare's work as a whole, no longer to single out several plays as the greatest, and mark the others only as

¹⁶Eric Bentley, "Lost Plays of W. Shakespeare," N.Y. Times Book Review (September 24, 1939), p. 5.

¹⁷T. S. Eliot, "Introduction," Wheel of Fire, p. xviii.

apprenticeship or decline--is I think an important and positive step in modern Shakespeare interpretation. More particularly, I think that Mr. Wilson Knight has shown insight in pursuing his search for the pattern below the level of "plot" and "character." There are plots and there are characters: the question of "sources" has its rights, and we must, if we go into the matter at all, inform ourselves of the exact proportion of invention, borrowing, and adaptation in the plot; and so far as possible we must separate the lines written by Shakespeare from those written by collaborators, or taken over from an earlier hand or interpolated by a later. This sort of work must be done to prepare for the search for the real pattern. But I think that Mr. Knight, among other things, has insisted upon the right way to interpret poetic drama. The writer of the poetic drama is not merely a man skilled in two arts and skilful to weave them in together; he is not a writer who can decorate a play with poetic language and metre. His task is different from that of the "dramatist" or that of the "poet," for his pattern is more complex and more dimensional; and with the subtraction which I have noted above, that Dante's pattern is the richer by a serious philosophy, and Shakespeare's poorer by a rag-bag philosophy, I should say that Shakespeare's pattern was more complex, and his problem more difficult, than Dante's. The genuine poetic drama must, at its best, observe all the regulations of the plain drama, but will weave them organically (to mix a metaphor and to borrow for the occasion a modern word) into a much richer design. But our first duty as either critics or "interpreters," surely, must be to try to grasp the whole design, and read character and plot in the understanding of this subterranean or submarine music. Here I say Mr. Knight has pursued the right line for his own plane of investigation, not hypostasizing "character" and "plot." For Shakespeare is one of the rarest of dramatic poets, in that each of his characters is most nearly adequate both to the requirements of the real world and to those of the poet's world. If we can apprehend this balance in *Pericles*, we can come to apprehend it even in *Goneril* and *Regan*. And here Mr. Knight seems to me to be very helpful in expressing the results of the passive, and more critical, poetic understanding.

Between these positive and negative considerations lies a viewpoint balanced and realistic which sees the efforts of G. Wilson Knight in the total pattern of Shakespearean criticism. Despite Knight's obvious errors, his imaginative interpretation is provocative. Yet a Shakespearean synthesis

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. xvii-xix.

even when so vitally expounded has its dangers. In commending it, Knight states that to act properly and to live on experience the mind must be subdued, dissolved, itself unpossessing. Creative things are often accomplished half-aware; while excessive awareness tends to the immoral.¹⁹

Excessive awareness, comments Fausset, is, in fact, insufficient self-conscious awareness, that cannot relax into the unconscious depths of being. But the mind that can so relax needs, also, to be continually alert to inform and discriminate what in humility it receives.

It is the determining capacity of the human reason which Knight both in his theory and his own practice tends to undervalue. Hence the frequent formlessness, and at times even lush excess, of his writing. But he has explored from within the self-conflict of the post-Renaissance man, even if the solution of conflict he offers is too much of a romantic simplification.²⁰

Perhaps Knight is, as Babcock suggests, "one more romantic critic of Shakespeare who establishes himself as the one and only critic of Shakespeare;"²¹ however, to inspire thought and controversy is in itself a considerable achievement. G. Wilson Knight has succeeded admirably in this.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

²⁰ Fausset, p. 186.

²¹ Babcock, p. 328.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Joan E. Biederstedt has been read
and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the
thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact
that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the
thesis is now given final approval with reference to content,
form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dec. 30, 1958
Date

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Signature of Adviser (PA)